

EQUALITY
GROUP

Inclusive Remote Working Guide

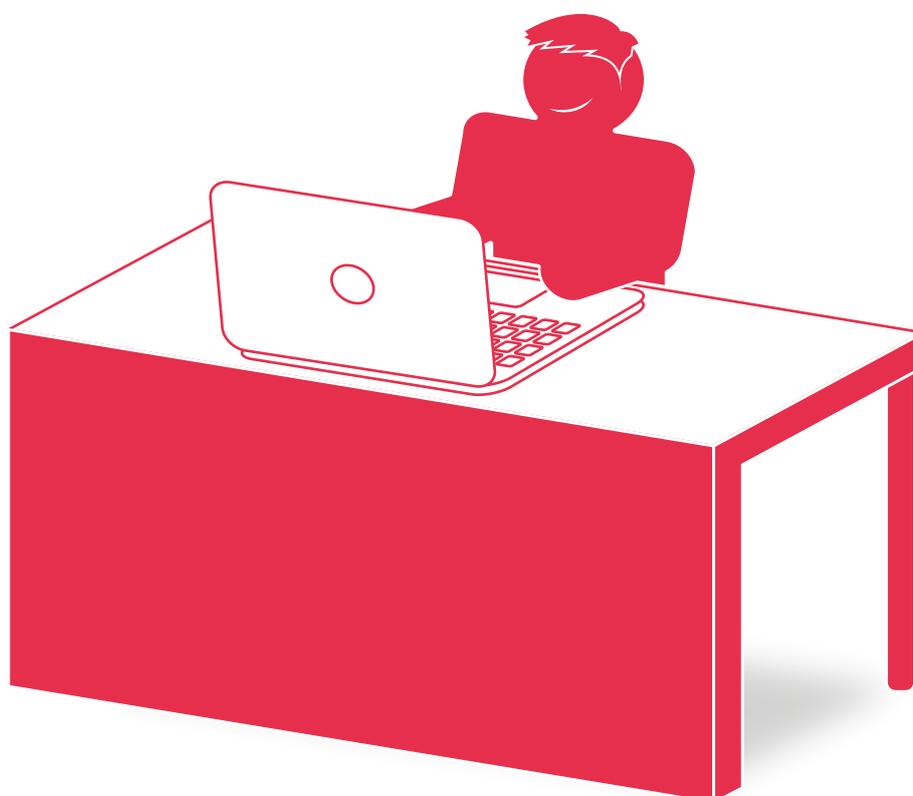
By Equality Group

Inclusive Remote Working Guide

We are currently going through a global pandemic, which is creating seismic shifts in all aspects of our personal and professional lives. Individuals and businesses are having to quickly adjust to this new way of living and working. Remote working is not just a functional shift for teams, it also has significant emotional, psychological and cultural implications and we want to support you in optimising for this new reality.

The Equality Group Inclusive Remote Working Guide is here to equip individuals and organisations to maintain and develop inclusive ways of working together, even when that work is happening digitally and in self-isolation for now. We have compiled scientifically-grounded advice for how to foster inclusion and connection for remote working teams, referencing a number of academic sources throughout and drawing upon the best business practice currently available.

Hopefully, some of these new inclusive working skills and practices will create more connection, care and community on the other side of this crisis and leave teams and businesses equipped to operate in any environment.



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1. Communication

Leadership and management roles are really tested at this time. What you do in this period will truly define you as a leader and as a manager. Communication is the number one priority for you and your team. It needs to be regular, empathetic and thoughtful. Often the same message can be framed in two different ways¹: you can focus on the things you would like to promote (e.g. be more inclusive and connected) or on the things you'd like to prevent (e.g. mistakes being made). A wealth of psychological research has shown that a focus on positive outcomes typically leads to better results. Our own research on inclusivity² showed that 60% of employees have stayed in a role because of a good boss.

- Listen

Counterintuitively, the best communication starts with active listening. Choosing to actively listen and be curious about your team is one of the top six traits of an inclusive leader³. Ask questions about how your team is adjusting and coping to this new working style. When you are listening, be empathetic in your responses, remember that the purpose of listening is not to give advice but to ensure that everyone feels heard and included.

- Provide psychological safety

We have all suddenly found ourselves in a world of uncertainty. This is why it's important to collectively recognise how strange it will feel not being together. This will take time to figure out, but it will be OK. However, being constantly bombarded with challenging news and, even worse, conspiracy theories means that various emotional responses will be triggered throughout the day, which will make your staff distracted. Leadership and management needs to be able to address these emotional concerns, especially when it comes to one-to-one communication.

Research shows⁴ that people who feel psychologically safe tend to be more innovative, learn from their mistakes and are motivated to improve their team or company with consequent positive effects on the bottom line. Encourage your team that they need to follow government advice, reassure them that the business is doing everything they can to ensure the safety and support of their employees.

- Prioritise

It is crucial at this point to focus on what really matters, what are the core things to do. Management needs to ensure that they are able to clearly communicate to their staff what they need to focus on. A short morning check-in can ensure that the team has a clear sense of direction and prioritisation. Make sure that your team is comfortable to communicate if they are behind their deadlines to ensure that work can be adjusted accordingly. Be confident to define and discuss expectations, maybe even more than normal. Remote work does prevent the quick recalibration or iteration happening on a project. Break down objectives to ensure that your team stays focused.

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2. Connection

Now that we have lost physical connection with others we have to redefine and be deliberate about establishing connections. Having the technology to be able to do that is very helpful but leaders need to make sure that everyone in their teams are comfortable and clear on which technology and when to use it. It is possible to ensure that your company runs as a well-oiled machine, but you can achieve that only if your team feels connected and motivated.

- Create co-working opportunities

Implement a balanced routine and keep your team online for the same parts of the day - keep connecting and brainstorming at the same time. Use online tools (such as Google docs) for collaboration and make sure every meeting has an agenda for documenting discussions, decisions, and actions. Everyone in the meeting can add notes at the same time. By brainstorming and meeting in text - we're forced to clearly articulate proposals and ideas, with less room for interpretations. This also ensures that everyone has an opportunity to express and share their ideas allowing everyone to feel included.

- Ideas and creativity

We should strive to accept that there are things that we don't know about the work we're trying to do, and that the best way to drive out that uncertainty is not by layering analysis and conjecture over it, but rather accepting it and moving forward with focus.

This is the time to foster creativity and encourage everyone to share their ideas. Wrong solutions can be fixed, but non-existent ones aren't adjustable at all.

You should aim to record all meetings, particularly when key individuals aren't able to join live. This allows team members to catch up on what transpired, adding context to notes that were taken during the meeting⁵.

- Learn together

None of us have experienced a situation like this before and it is therefore impossible to foresee what effect some of these changes will have on our future. Going through a period of unprecedented change as a team is challenging due to the uncertainty that comes with it, but it is equally an opportunity to grow, learn, develop and build resilience together. The more we can expose ourselves and our business to learning opportunities, the better we can become overtime.

- Amplify

It is also crucial to ensure that the contributions of the minority group representatives in your company are recognised. On video calls, you can practice this by asking the first question to a minority group representative directly and allowing them to express their ideas without any interruptions, and then ask follow up questions accordingly⁶.

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- Mentorship and Sponsorship

Mentorship and sponsorship are some of the best ways to ensure that everyone in your team feels supported and connected. This is especially important for minority groups as this is one of the best methods of debiasing career development⁷. Especially now in times of remote working, when they are physically not noticed, their voices and challenges might be overlooked. Our Connections at Work Report⁸ shows that work relationships are the most significant factor in career progression, yet 55% of people still do not feel fully equipped to develop the right relationships at work. Spending time on establishing a virtual mentoring programme could be one of the best solutions to maintain an inclusive culture and support your employees through this challenging period.

- Facilitate informal communication

Having a social connection with co-workers builds trust within your organisation. When everyone works remotely, casual interactions don't happen organically over coffee or by going for a quick stroll together. This lack of in-person human interaction is considered to be a drawback of remote work, and that's exactly why remote companies need to facilitate these interactions for their teams. Virtual coffees or happy hours in small groups also allows your staff to debrief together and establish better support systems. This is especially crucial for new employees, who have recently joined the business. Establishing a sense of belonging in a remote environment is very challenging, therefore, those team members might need extra support and encouragement.



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3. Space and Boundaries

We have to remember that everyone's home is different and not everyone has the same facilities. Not everyone has a quiet office space where they can work uninterrupted, given caring responsibilities, school closures and varying degrees of health. This is why it's crucial to show understanding and leniency when it comes to meetings and deep working.

- Creating the optimal work environment

A lot of research has been done on the optimal conditions for learning and productivity. These include lots of natural light⁹, little or no external noise¹⁰, keeping the temperature comfortable for working, ideally between 20°C and 23.3°C (or 68°F and 74°F)¹¹ and making sure that all materials and supplies are easily accessible¹². While these conditions are beneficial for all people who work in the environment, it is important to recognise the specific benefits for people who are differently abled¹³. Research shows that structural difficulties negatively affect the productivity of people with physical disabilities¹⁴. Some research also specifically showed that improving these structural elements improves both engagement and performance across a range of abilities¹⁵. Making it easy for everyone to get the tools and resources they need gives them more time to focus on their real work and ultimately makes them more productive.

- Family at work

This is likely to be the most difficult hurdle to clear, particularly for new work-from-home employees who have family in the home. If you have family in the home try to have a dedicated conversation as soon as possible, helping them understand that just because you're home, that doesn't mean you're available. A shortcut to boundary setting is this: "If it's important enough that you'd commute to my usual office and come to my desk, then it's important enough for you to visit my home workspace." You may also consider a busy / available indicator. For families who aren't used to this, boundaries can be difficult to establish and maintain. When an employee is visibly at home, it may signal to other family members that they're accessible. This tends to be particularly vital to discuss with children, who may struggle to understand why a working parent is in the home everyday and why they aren't at school¹⁶.

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- Time management

The more your home and work life blend, the more important it is to implement clear guidelines and separation between the two. Doing your work in the hours that you are contracted to will prevent burnout and will create a sustainable working structure. You can find our suggestion for how to structure your day at the end of this document, together with some useful time management tools¹⁷.

- Mental health and wellbeing of staff is vital

Looking at additional wellness and mental health programmes at this time could be crucial for your team, especially for those who do not have strong family or friends networks to support them. Doing a survey to figure out where the gaps are and what exactly your team needs will ensure that you support your team in a way that is sensitive and appropriate. The solutions might be as simple as providing meditation resources, or an opportunity to meet up virtually for a workout or virtual counselling. Having access to the right resources might make a big difference to someone's situation.



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4. Bias

Our biases don't disappear just because we aren't interacting in person. In fact, as we rely more on our instincts in pressured circumstances our biases come to play even more. This means that those who are already vulnerable or unsupported will find themselves in much more challenging circumstances than most.

- Bias for Action

It's important that we keep our focus on action, and don't fall into the trap of analysis paralysis or sticking to a slow, quiet path without risk. Decisions should be thoughtful, but delivering fast results requires the fearless acceptance of occasionally making mistakes; our bias for action also allows us to course correct quickly. Everyone will make mistakes, but it's the relative number of mistakes against all decisions made (i.e. percentage of mistakes), and the swift correction or resolution of that mistake, which is important. We should not allow fear to stop us from going forward, but collaboratively and transparently make the best possible decisions¹⁸.

- Asynchronous Bias

Take initiative to operate asynchronously whenever possible. This shows care and consideration for those who may not be in the same time zone, are traveling outside of their usual time zone, or are structuring their day around pressing commitments at home or in their community.

This is demonstrated by communicating recordings of meetings and being sensitive to local holidays and vacation statuses. Encourage others to default to documentation rather than pressuring others to be online outside of their working hours.

- Resource and Availability Bias

As we are unaware what the personal circumstances are for the employees it is unfair to assume that everyone has access to the same resources, such as internet connections, working space and appliances. This is why it's essential to ensure that your team is comfortable in communicating their needs and areas where they need support.

Major challenges are faced by those who are primary carers, especially those who find themselves at home with children.

This is the time to exercise our values, show compassion and kindness, an opportunity to create a level playing field for your colleagues who are in part of your working community.

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5. Time Control

Think about blocking out your work into different categories ensuring that you put yourself into the best possible environment, both physically and mentally. This will enable you to achieve great outcomes.

Team Time

- Team Time

These sessions are an opportunity to connect, communicate and focus on collective and individual priorities together. They could be all-hands meetings, one to ones or smaller team sessions. They are also important to meet our need for social interaction and belonging.

Deep Work

- Deep Work

These sessions are the true substance of your work and what you are being paid to do by the business or by a client. They produce valuable deliverables and should be the best use of our skillset. Explore what are the most optimal conditions for deep work for you and make sure to create them¹⁹.

Personal / Family

- Personal/ Family

Dedicated ring fenced times for your own hobbies, exercise or checking on social media are important to reduce distractions and wasted time during the work day. Caring or homeschooling for your family is also important to schedule into the day and it might be that you have to plan team time and deep work time around these slots first. Keep communication with your team as open and proactive as possible.

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