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07

BRIEFING PAPER ADDENDUM

REMOTE INCLUSION

Emerging Issues

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REMOTE INCLUSION



The Covid-19 pandemic sparked a remote working revolution, with many organisations forced to shift large portions of their workforce to at-home working virtually overnight.

Many handled this initial transition effectively. However, as remote working persists organisations now face the longer-term challenges of maintaining an inclusive culture across a dispersed workforce. Signs of strain are beginning to emerge, differentiated by geography and employee population.

Given its close links to employee wellbeing, inclusivity in remote working environments – what we call ‘remote inclusion’ – is increasingly capturing employers’ attention.

As organisations begin to understand what the ‘next normal’ will look like, identifying those groups under strain and embedding practices and processes to mitigate it will be a key task. Remote inclusion is about more than just making chat tools such as Yammer available or hosting a Friday afternoon drinks event on Zoom, and getting it right will be critical.

This research identifies some of the groups most at-risk of remote exclusion, considers the unique role of line managers in building and maintaining inclusive remote cultures, and outlines practical steps those managers can take to build inclusivity into daily practice.

CRAFTING A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

A radical shift to remote working coupled with the global health and economic trauma of the pandemic has meant that employers can expect large portions of their workforce to experience physical and mental health challenges simultaneously.

See CRF’s 2020 report, [*Let’s Get \(Beyond\) Physical: Crafting a Multidimensional Approach to Employee Wellbeing*](#), for a closer look at wellbeing issues.



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THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSION

The business benefits of inclusive working environments are well-established.

- **Candidate attraction.** Research from McKinsey & Company finds that 39% of respondents “have turned down or decided not to pursue a job because of a perceived lack of inclusion at an organisation.” This is likely to become more important going forward, as research from Accenture shows that younger generations are even more concerned with workplace culture than their older counterparts (75% of Gen Z vs. 64% of Baby Boomers).
- **Employee retention.** Research cited by The Wharton School finds that “employees who feel like they belong have a 50% lower rate of turnover than employees who feel excluded.” Other research finds that employees who experience microaggressions are three times more likely than those who do not to consider leaving their jobs. This is important, as employee turnover is costly – depending on the role, it can cost “up to 200% of an employee’s annual salary to hire a new person into a position.” Employee turnover is also costly in terms of time and the loss of institutional knowledge.
- **Performance.** Wharton School research finds that employees with a high sense of belonging take 75% fewer sick days than those who feel excluded, and exhibit a 56% increase in job performance. Those who feel highly connected at work receive twice as many raises and are 18 times more likely to be promoted in a six-month period than those who feel excluded.
- **Improved quality of decision-making.** Research consistently shows that more diverse and inclusive teams make more accurate decisions.

Flexibility is one of the attributes of inclusive cultures that remote working brings to the fore, with important potential benefits. Flexibility may play a significant role in the retention of women, who still often bear the burden of a ‘second shift’ of domestic

and childcare work, beyond their paid labour. It is also a key tool for attracting and retaining younger talent, who have increased expectations for how they balance their professional and personal lives.

Remote working is also poised to improve diversity and inclusion at organisations because it creates opportunities to hire and retain talent that may not have been previously available, such as working and single parents, dual-career couples, the disabled, and talent from a broad range of geographies (who may no longer have to be located near a physical office).

While the benefits of inclusion are clear, research has also shown a disconnect between leaders’ and employees’ perceptions of their organisation’s culture. Accenture calls this the ‘perception gap’ – 20% of employees report that they do not feel included (that is, welcome, able to contribute fully, and to thrive) in their organisations, while leaders estimate that only 2% feel this way. Further, 68% of leaders feel they create empowering environments, those in which “employees can be themselves, raise concerns and innovate without fear of failure”, but only 36% of employees agree.

It is thus important that organisations, many of which may already be experiencing a perception gap, understand and be prepared to react to the risks posed to inclusion in remote environments, in order to realise the benefits of inclusion more broadly and to take advantage of the new opportunities remote working brings.



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THE EXCLUSION RISK IN REMOTE WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

Every organisation has in-groups and out-groups. Members of an in-group are close to one another and feel more connected to the centre. Those in an out-group may feel that they have no voice at all within the organisation.

In-group/out-group dynamics are easily exacerbated in remote working environments. Members of the in-group will be in constant communication across multiple channels, while those in the out-group may be all too easily forgotten. Though it may be inadvertent rather than deliberate, exclusive behaviour and biases are easily reinforced in remote working environments.

Remote working environments also make it easier to avoid difficult conversations, and they minimise the opportunities for spontaneous new connections to form between colleagues, and between leaders and their employees. Isolation of those in out-groups can lead to uncertainty about who to talk to as specific issues arise, and confusion or discomfort about when and how to approach colleagues may increase. This increasing invisibility may not only negatively impact the employee's sense of belonging, but can also mean missed opportunities for development.

Thus, senior leaders must set the tone and expectations around remote inclusion, while managers and colleagues embed inclusion into daily remote working practices. This means being mindful and purposeful about how meetings are run, how people communicate, how they connect, and how they develop.

STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN REMOTE AND FRONT-LINE COLLEAGUES

We recognise that there is a tension in the conversation around remote inclusion – those workers in front-line positions have not had the luxury of participating in the en masse move to remote working. For those organisations where the majority of the workforce did not work remotely during the crisis, safety protocols and issues of equity between front-line and remote colleagues are at the fore.

The pressing question is how to strike a balance of fairness between colleagues who have the option of working remotely with flexible hours, and those who do not (and who also tend to be lower-paid, with fewer benefits). Fairness between colleagues is critical, but the equity question is very difficult to manage. In many organisations, the reality is that those who are paid less and have less comfortable jobs have suffered most throughout the crisis, and a balance of fairness for all is overdue.

For a closer look at some of the issues as organisations think about new ways of working, please see CRF's [Post Meeting Notes](#).

WHO IS AT-RISK OF REMOTE EXCLUSION?

In our conversations for this research, we found that organisations are mostly still in the process of figuring out the extent to which remote working will continue post-crisis, who it's working for, who it is not working for, and which groups among their workforces are most at risk of remote exclusion.

There is recognition that remote working doesn't suit everyone, and some organisations are already allowing people to return to the office optionally (for example, to access better Wi-Fi or equipment, or for reasons of mental wellbeing).

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Whatever the future configuration of remote- to office-based working, it is likely that some form of increased remote working for larger sections of the workforce will become normative for many organisations. Establishing inclusive practices among those working remotely, and between remote and in-office groups, will be critical.

As Tim Hodgson, Human Resources Director at insurance company ReAssure, explains, "Once we drift back to the new normal, we are really conscious of people being left out by remaining at home. We are concerned about those who are not visible, and may consequently not be heard. Who are they, and what strategies and initiatives do we need to develop to make sure they are included? For example, it may be that more women take the option to work remotely because of childcare responsibilities. It's on our radar, we are very conscious of it. It's not a problem at the moment, as 85-90% of our people are still working from home, and apparently happily so, but we see that it could easily become a problem in the future."

The groups most at-risk of remote exclusion will vary by organisation, depending on particular workforce demographics, but some of the groups mentioned again and again in the interviews for this research include:

- **Working mothers.** Research has shown that remote working fathers are scoring well above remote working mothers in wellbeing, engagement, and productivity. And while balancing work and private life is a top concern for remote working mothers, this concern doesn't even enter the top ten for remote working fathers. With a disproportionate burden of childcare and home-schooling responsibilities falling to working mothers, care is needed to maintain their inclusion.
- **New starters.** It can be challenging to make connections and build one's network in all-remote environments. This is especially so for graduate new starters. As Kate Mills of Newton Europe explains, "The team has done an amazing job in the circumstances of bringing new people into the business, flexing our training and supporting them to feel part of the team. But graduates don't know the world of work, how to work with a client; it's really challenging to induct them when they are missing out on those conversations you overhear in-person, when they can't watch, listen, and learn from others. How do you introduce people to the world of work when they are remote and inexperienced?"

- **Part-time employees.** With organisations moving at unprecedented speed in problem-solving and decision-making, part-time workers may be at a disadvantage.
- **Both older and younger employees.** Some younger workers may be struggling with the lack of social interaction brought on by COVID-19. House shares and limited space may also disproportionately impact younger workers, especially those living in cities. There is a longer-term risk that young employees, new to the world of work, will miss out on important informal learning that contributes to later career development. Older workers may struggle to adjust to a radical new way of working and the demands of multiple new technologies.
- **People without dependents.** Research has shown that remote workers with dependents are faring better in engagement, productivity and wellbeing than those without dependents. This is being driven by a diminished sense of community among those without dependents. Organisations thus need to work even harder to build community for this population.
- **Employees from more deprived social backgrounds.** More limited broadband access and lack of home-office space are two issues that may disproportionately impact employees from more deprived social backgrounds, and thus foster exclusion.
- **People with any form of disability that makes it harder to work remotely.** This can include physical and mental impairments.

Equality Impact Assessment at Mott MacDonald

Together with the Health and Safety team and employee networks in each region, global engineering, management, and development firm Mott MacDonald carried out an Equality Impact Assessment of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It found a potentially disproportionate impact on female colleagues, both as primary carers and as people at increased risk of experiencing domestic violence due to requirements to work from home. The impact assessment allowed the company to organise a quick response to the issues, which included the development of toolkits and guidance for all regions.



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THE ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS

Systemic efforts play an important role in building diverse and inclusive organisations, but equally inclusivity is empowered by individual behaviour. Senior leaders, line managers, and peers must all do their part to consciously build an inclusive culture through daily practice.

For example, leaders have an important role to play in setting the tone, supporting the agenda, and being visible and accountable for results. Peers need to develop inclusive mindsets, be aware of their own biases, and learn how to become effective allies.

Line managers are especially important to building and maintaining inclusive cultures – remote and in-person – because they are central to employees’ experiences of inclusion (or exclusion) at work, and thus play an important role in engagement, performance, and retention. By building inclusion into daily practice, line managers can create an environment where all team members are contributing to the team’s cohesiveness, productivity, and goals. This is especially important in remote environments where the usual touchpoints of the office setting are missing. Yet, line managers may be uncertain about their role in inclusion and how to build inclusive teams, and may not see it as part of their core job functions.

Proactively supporting line managers in their inclusion work is key – the most advanced organisations do not leave it to chance. For example, at law firm DLA Piper, the Diversity and Inclusion team produced a guide early on during the pandemic (distributed through HRBPs) that provided managers with explicit guidelines for how to work remotely and inclusively. At Fidelity International, the D&I team has conducted regular webinars on a range of topics for all colleagues, with a couple of the webinars specially targeted to line managers (such as how to support team members who live alone). Fidelity has also and have produced toolkits on how to have open and constructive conversations around wellbeing as part of normal conversation. At WD-40 Company, managers have video calls every two weeks in which they share experiences, challenges, and good practice between departments.

While there is no catch-all solution to how to get inclusion right – the organisational context and the team’s needs should guide the response – we have identified several general good practices that may help line managers build and maintain inclusive remote cultures. We highlight how line managers can run meetings more inclusively, how to communicate effectively and build connections between diverse colleagues, and how to take a more inclusive approach to development.

HOW YOU RUN MEETINGS

The good news about remote meetings is that technologies such as Zoom have proven to be great levellers – everyone is in the same ‘room’, and is randomly sorted across the screen in boxes of the same size. “Having everyone on a Zoom call has been a great democratiser for us,” explains Sarah Kaiser, Head of Employee Experience at Fidelity International, where the use of Zoom unexpectedly brought down barriers on cross-national teams, whose members are no longer half physically present in a room and half out.

But meeting format can be a barrier to inclusion. Many meetings – both remote and in-person – are run in a caucus format, where there are no rules about who talks, for how long, or in what order. The free-for-all approach of such meetings can exacerbate exclusive social dynamics, or exaggerate the impact of technological differences (such as when someone with slower internet gets left out of the conversation).

We suggest the following practices for running meetings more inclusively, so that all employees feel seen and heard for their contributions.



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- **Have ground rules and a moderator** to keep the meeting in line in terms of who speaks, when, and for how long. Be sure to rotate responsibility for moderating meetings.
- **Introduce and call on everyone during a meeting.** One strategy is to start meetings by asking everyone to answer the same question. This ensures everyone's voice gets into the discussion. Another strategy is to ask every team member for their opinion at least once and, importantly, acknowledge their answers. If team size prohibits everyone speaking, line managers should track and consciously rotate speaking opportunities, ensuring a representative sample of team members contribute each week.
- **Be mindful about the use of video** – while many organisations are encouraging 'cameras on', and this can help build rapport, some team members (such as LGBT colleagues or those from more deprived social backgrounds) may be uncomfortable revealing aspects of their private lives to colleagues. There may also be a potential downside to the use of video in that, once the novelty wears off, seeing inside peoples' homes may reinforce negative stereotypes, and thus increase the risk that people are judged or excluded on the basis of their social characteristics. One solution is to encourage team members to use virtual backgrounds (though of course, older technology may not support these).
- If a team member is talked over or interrupted, the moderator should **ensure the conversation is returned to them.**
- Equally, moderators should **ensure credit is given where it's due** – if someone reiterates someone else's idea, take time to point out who raised the idea originally.
- **Invite different opinions when problem-solving**, and explicitly ask if there are any additional perspectives that should be considered. Once a decision is made, draw attention to the role that different opinions and perspectives played in reaching the best answer.
- If technology allows, **enable anonymous commenting features** so that team members have an additional layer of psychological safety when speaking up.
- Moderators should **keep an eye out for silent voices and draw them into the conversation.**

- For hybrid teams (part remote, part in the office), **consider using Zoom or other virtual meeting technologies for all meetings.** At DLA Piper, requiring hybrid team meetings to be conducted virtually has allowed their democratising effect to endure.

"Inclusion can equally be about the boundaries you allow people to have. For example, letting people turn their cameras off if they are feeling a little anxious, or use the chat function to contribute in remote meetings – these have proven to be positives for introverts, giving them a different type of voice."

CLAIRE BLACK, LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, B&Q



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HOW YOU COMMUNICATE

One of the key takeaways from mass remote working thus far is that communication is key. Regular, transparent communication – even overcommunication – has played an important role in the productivity and connection that many organisations have maintained.

We suggest the following practices for more inclusive communication.

- **Implement 'quiet hours' on digital collaboration channels.** In the tech industry, communication often happens on digital channels such as Slack. Teams communicate in real-time, posing problems, debating options, and making decisions very quickly. While great for efficiency and collaboration in remote environments, when team members in one time zone have debated and solved a problem before members in another time zone wake up, such communication can become exclusive and lead to sub-optimal decision-making. 'Quiet hours' get around this problem by limiting conversations to core hours when all team members can take part. In the broader context of remote working, quiet hours can ensure that team members juggling work with caring and other responsibilities, such as remote working mothers, are still included in vital conversations and decisions.
- **Increase situational savviness.** Nokia is encouraging its line managers to develop their situational savviness. In part, this means encouraging team members to be open and transparent about their work/family situations, so the team can plan better together. Line managers can role model behaviour by being transparent about their own schedules and when and how to approach them. Being more culturally aware (for example, what are the different religious holidays that affect team members?) and being aware of one's own tendency toward bias in stressful situations are other ways to increase situational savviness.
- **Demonstrate vulnerability** by sharing more about your personal circumstances, and be open about your own unexpected needs to help others feel more comfortable to do the same. Sharing personal stories can be an effective tool. When managers share their own personal stories, it can encourage direct reports to share their personal experiences as well and may enhance their sense of belonging (as long as they do not feel forced to share). Ask open-ended questions on topics employees care about in order to get to know them better.
- **Schedule check-ins.** Make time each week to check-in with employees, asking how they are feeling physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Ask them to share challenges they are facing and what they need to respond effectively. When checking in with employees who may feel like 'onlies' on the team, ask questions rather than make assumptions about their experience.
- **Be brave and willing to have challenging conversations.** Acknowledge difficult situations when they arise, ask questions, and create safe spaces in which people can openly share their feelings and needs. Create such spaces by first acknowledging potential mistakes, and expressing a desire to learn more. Have ground rules for engagement, and consider using a moderator to monitor and/or a facilitator to guide the conversation.
- **Make sure that everyone has up-to-date technology,** and a good understanding of the different communication channels available. Managers can use multiple digital touchpoints (such as conference calls and WhatsApp) to facilitate communication.
- To facilitate two-way dialogue, **collect, synthesize, and share feedback on the team's climate.** This can enable managers and team members to understand and support each other more effectively.
- **Connect people from all levels.** For example, some organisations have hosted competitions or brainstorming sessions around innovation or strategy. Employees are randomly assigned to a Zoom to chat, get to know one another, and come up with ideas.
- **Schedule time for remote networking and team-building** – sessions in which the only objective is for team members to get to know one another and forge



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new connections. To be successful, these sessions need to be structured. Use games or exercises that encourage interactions between team members who are unfamiliar with one another. For example:

- Ask team members to share two truths and a lie. This can be an engaging way for people to share surprising stories about themselves and learn more about one another.
- In lieu of the Friday 'pub quiz' or 'cocktail hour', ask team members to screen share a funny or interesting photo of themselves. Have other team members 'guess the situation' before the owner of the photograph shares the story behind it.
- Ask team members to privately submit a few fun or surprising facts about themselves. Create a trivia game that brings the facts together, highlighting similarities, differences, and strengths across the team.
- Randomly assign team members to virtual breakout rooms, and task them with identifying three similarities and one difference. Bring everyone back to the larger group after 10 or 15 minutes to share what they discovered.
- **Keep employee networks engaged.** Employee support networks can help individuals feel part of a community and allow them to engage with colleagues facing similar challenges. Ensure your organisation's employee networks stay strong in remote environments by giving them adequate resources and innovative technology.

HOW YOU CONNECT

Remote working environments can amplify any exclusive dynamics that already existed between on-site teams, and may create new ones. Those who already have established relationships will be in constant communication, while those on the periphery are at risk of being 'out of sight, out of mind'. Managers should incorporate deliberate, structured interactions so that instead of interacting primarily with familiar team members, everyone is building new connections.

Look for ways to virtually re-create the magic of spontaneous in-person interactions. As Nicola Paul explains, "In the office, you have that dynamic where conversations may be continued 'offline'. For example, normally when you are leaving a meeting, some people will fall into step together to continue discussing the issues. These interactions build rapport and strengthen relationships. Working remotely, we click 'leave' at the end of the call, and can't physically see if and how others continue the conversation. So we have to be really mindful about how we are connecting to build relationships in the remote environment."

We suggest the following practices for connecting more inclusively while working remotely.

- **Connect people from all levels.** For example, some organisations have hosted competitions or brainstorming sessions around innovation or strategy. Employees are randomly assigned to a Zoom to chat, get to know one another, and come up with ideas.
- **Schedule time for remote networking and team-building** – sessions in which the only objective is for team members to get to know one another and forge new connections. To be successful, these sessions need to be structured. Use games or exercises that encourage interactions between team members who are unfamiliar with one another. For example:



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HOW YOU DEVELOP YOUR PEOPLE

In remote working environments, managers can be more inclined to lean on their 'go-to' people when new opportunities arise. Those who may already be thriving gain new opportunities to grow, while those who may not have had a chance yet are shut out. Managers should think creatively about how to allocate opportunities for development.

We suggest the following practices for more inclusively allocating development opportunities in remote working environments.

- Regularly assess team members' interests, goals, and development intentions. Keep track of who you spoke with and when to ensure no one is left out.
- When a new opportunity arises, don't simply give it to the first person who comes to mind. Consult and be guided by your notes on team members' interests, goals, and development intentions.
- Increase the transparency of opportunities by asking for volunteers from among the whole team.
- Don't assume that a team member is – or isn't – interested in an opportunity. Ask instead.

Graduate new starters may be especially at risk of falling behind in their development if they are working entirely remotely. Newton Europe, the management consultancy firm, has looked for ways to rotate graduate new starters through projects that are on-site when possible, as one solution.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Look for opportunities to upskill senior leaders in inclusive leadership.** Ensure that leaders are represented on D&I councils and have a robust line of communication with employee networks. Design learning interventions that enable leaders to lean into their fear and discomfort around identity and equality issues. Cultivate opportunities for formal and informal listening, and ensure that mentoring programmes connect leaders to high-potential talent across the demographic spectrum.
- **Incentivise line managers to incorporate inclusion work into their daily practice.** Consider allowing managers to carve out time for inclusion work. Set performance objectives related to this work, and ideally tie those objectives to reward. Ensure there are costs to behaviours that are at odds with the organisation's diversity and inclusion strategy.
- **Help employees to develop inclusive mindsets and behaviours.** Explain why diversity and inclusion goals are a business imperative. Demystify D&I language, which can be a barrier to entering the conversation. Create 'safe space' forums in which employees can learn and exchange ideas, and help employees upskill themselves through virtual toolkits, communications that signpost to relevant resources, and so on.
- **Identify those groups at risk of remote exclusion in your organisation and develop a targeted response.** Working mothers will face different barriers to inclusion and will need different sorts of support compared to new graduates or disabled colleagues, for example. Ask who is at risk of exclusion, identify why, and develop appropriate interventions or support.
- **Support line managers to run inclusive meetings.** Develop toolkits, run seminars, or use other interventions to help managers think through the practical steps they can take to run remote or hybrid meetings in an inclusive manner.
- **Communicate regularly and transparently.** Make sure employees have equal access to communications technology. Encourage managers to check-in frequently with team members. Consider implementing 'quiet hours' on communications channels so that all team members have the opportunity to take part in conversations around problem-solving.
- **Deliberately build opportunities for people to forge new connections remotely.** One of the most effective ways to do this is to dedicate structured time to remote networking and team-building activities. This doesn't mean just hosting a cocktail hour, but using exercises and games to facilitate people to make new connections.

See CRF's 2020 Briefing Paper, [D&I: Emerging Issues](#), for more detail.



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