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The Remote4All (R4All) research project

This project explored the **impact of remote e-working for people with a disability and/or neurodivergence**. The project highlights that more research and support is needed for this group of workers, 20% of the working population, to work in a way that best supports their needs and capabilities. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through the [Digital Futures at Work Research Centre](#) (Digit), which is investigating how digital technologies are changing work and the implications for employers, workers, job seekers and governments. It is co-led by the University of Sussex and the University of Leeds Business Schools.

R4All Research key findings:

- The Remote4All project found a substantial gap in academic knowledge on disabled and/or neurodivergent people's experience of remote e-working.
- Further, limited research in this area mostly focused on physical disabilities, overlooking other invisible disabilities and neurodivergence. Interviews with employees, employers, and stakeholders provided rich data.
- The key findings highlighted that there is 'no one size fits all' solution and it is essential to listen and understand the individual needs to make remote working accessible and optimal for everyone. Remote working was considered as an essential reasonable adjustment for some disabled and/or neurodivergent workers to sustain and gain employment.
- The role of Line Managers was identified as pivotal to promote inclusiveness, and therefore needs to be trained effectively.

How big a difference has and could remote working make to the employment of disabled people?

- Our research showed it can make a real difference for some, enabling disabled and/or neurodivergent people to gain and sustain employment. **For some employment would not be possible without it.**
- Management support and a working environment in which they felt safe to disclose their needs was essential to make it work.

- Previous research shows that disabled people are less likely to be able to work remotely than non-disabled people due to low paid and less autonomous roles (e.g., management).

“I was able to work, I just wasn't able to get to work” (referring to mobility problems and in some cases changes in medication). Reducing/eliminating the commute can help.

Pre-pandemic remote working was limited in the general population to those with autonomy in their roles and those that had sought home working as an accommodation for a disability. Attitudes towards remote working were less positive and requesting this for an accommodation was sometimes found to generate stigma against those requesting this arrangement. Post-pandemic remote working has become a more acceptable working arrangement for many organisations (depending on the role) thus reducing the stigma attached to this style of working and increasingly levelling the playing field for all workers.

Remote working can enable a better management of resources (e.g., pacing for chronic illness and for neurodivergent people) including working time, work environment, self-efficacy and for organisations developing a culture of trust, openness and psychological safety (trust being vital to the remote working relationships between worker and line manager). Unfortunately, it can also deplete psychological resources by increasing *over-working and* presenteeism (working when sick), as well as *social isolation* and *invisibility* with peers and managers. To retain well-being recuperation from work is necessary, in our study we found that some interviewees worked longer hours, this also occurs for all groups of remote workers but is amplified for this group of remote workers.

Employers noted that retaining visibility was important and creating opportunities to check in and to join support groups was helpful, for all remote workers but in particular for those with a disability and/or neurodivergent. Productivity in our study was found to relate to positive coping, regular line manager check-ins and visibility supporting positive coping mechanisms. It is worth noting that we also found in our literature review that disabled employees were found to be less likely to work from home due to holding lower-paid and non-managerial jobs, compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

Most of our interviewees felt that remote working enabled better management of their conditions and for some employment would not be possible without the remote working option of working. ***Some of our participants advised that not getting remote working as a reasonable adjustment would be a cause to leave the organisation.***

Overall, our research found that providing flexibility around the ability to remote work enabled some (those that we interviewed) disabled and/or neurodivergent people to gain employment and importantly to sustain employment by agreeing and discussing their work arrangements with their line manager and feeling safe to disclose any requirements and accommodations needed.

The line manager being key to supporting the arrangement, checking in regularly for health/well-being, reviewing performance and measuring outputs rather than inputs to ensure sustainability.

Can it help increase job retention rates among disabled people and ultimately rates of disability employment?

- Yes. We found evidence that remote working created a more sustainable working environment, increasing retention.
- Good management support was highly valued but there is evidence that managers' understanding of the issues and how to provide support is still limited.

- Training for managers would help to maximise the benefits of remote working for this group with regards to job retention.
- For some disabled and/or neurodiverse people, remote working is essential.
- Our research found that providing a supportive environment for disabled and/or neurodivergent workers can create a more sustainable working environment and this increasing job retention. *“I found the office environment to be busy, distracting, physically tiring to navigate, and the constant social interaction difficult when I was struggling with fatigue due to my disability.”*
- For some workers being able to control communication better, switching cameras off in virtual meetings, thus reducing eye contact and lessening the need to interpret body language can all help.
- Gaining appropriate supportive technology and gaining a home working set-up that is comfortable, including managing lighting and other aspects of the environment were found to be important in our study for productive work.

Are there any risks associated with remote working for disabled people? Is there a danger of disabled people being forced into remote working arrangements that don't really work for them?

- Social isolation, invisibility, not feeling part of the organisation, disengagement and poor line manager support. Lack of peer support and a sense of belonging.
- Being requested to undertake other forms of remote work that maybe less suitable e.g., hybrid work (this may or may not work for this group). Not tailoring the working style and environment to specific needs when working remotely.
- We found that remote working was not a 'one size fits all' arrangement – it needed to be tailored to meet specific and individual requirements, not making assumptions but listening to needs.
- Remote working is not the solution for everyone in this group, our study found that some people worked better in an office environment, whereby peer support was available to them and they could have more informal conversations - there were many differences and preferences, e.g., communication, office environment etc.

How important is the role of line managers?

- This is vital to successful remote working, feeling able to disclose (and/or request accommodations) to line managers and peers is very important – requiring an open and trusting culture in order to feel safe (psychological safety).
- In our literature review we did find that there was reported lack of knowledge and awareness in line management, particularly for working with neurodivergent workers, this is a gap that the R4All research looked to further explore.
- Dr Grant currently has further funding to develop a line manager toolkit for remote disabled and/or neurodivergent workers, which could be further supported by the DWP.

Line manager support when in place can make the difference between a good work experience or a poor one, thus affecting sustainable working and ultimately retention. It was very highly valued by our interviewees when line managers took time to listen and understand their needs as these are different in every circumstance. For this group a tailored approach to remote working is helpful, ensuring that the positive effects of this style working are realised and any negative effects are minimised and managed well.

Good line management was found to be crucial in our study, we found relationships between openness and disclosure and to sustainable working. It is clear that an open, safe and trusting culture provides the psychological safety required for this group of workers to gain the accommodations required. It is also necessary to continue the open listening style (not telling) to gain sustainable working.

What are the main barriers to employers and employees agreeing remote working arrangements?

- A work environment in which there is sufficient trust and openness to enable disclosure by workers of the arrangements they need to do their best work.
- Stigmatising remote working is likely to undermine this, whether at organisational or policy level.
- Line manager training is required - they may not know remote working is a reasonable adjustment.

Disclosure and effective line manager support, knowledge and awareness of the benefits of remote working. Some roles may not be suitable for remote working and this needs to be discussed. Disclosure was important to many of our interviews to be able to gain the support needed, not disclosing they felt could lead to detrimental outcomes as employers may not be fully clear why the individual is not performing at their best.

Openness, trust and psychological safety need to be in place in order for disclosure to take place and for appropriate accommodations to be discussed with a person-centred approach. Disclosure can be important as it relates to the protection under the Equality Act and if done sensitively then it can help to destigmatise.

Where a disabled person requests remote working as a reasonable adjustment, do you think employers have the confidence and knowledge they need to make the right decisions?

“Guidance to employers to listen to people with disabilities and not make assumptions, ask them what support is needed and provide flexibility and choice in working arrangements, e.g. flexible working hours and choice of home/remote/blended working.”

- There is a need for updated guidance in this area, current guidance on flexible working does not go far enough to instil confidence in employers to understand the needs of this group.
- We found that there was a need to provide more knowledge to line managers to build employer confidence in this area.
- I am currently working on a Line Manager tool kit for disabled workers (with key stakeholders) that will help to develop confidence.

Whether remote working could be considered a reasonable adjustment will depend on the nature of a person’s role. How confident are employers when it comes to making these decisions?

- As above this is an area whereby employers/line managers need to review the job description and role requirements carefully with the individual.
- Discussing how the role can work effectively with some or all remote working as an accommodation.
- Often hybrid working arrangement (% time agreed for working on site and from home) can be a solution to ameliorate some of the less positive aspects of remote working, such as social isolation, ability to network but may not work for everyone in this group depending on their needs and disability/s.

- Adequately preparing line managers to have supportive conversations is vital to agreeing how the role can be adapted (if necessary) to remote working.

Many roles were transitioned during the pandemic to remote working so it is important to discuss and agree the parameters of the role and how this could work best. Employers in our study understood the need to have these discussions early on.

The committee should work with appropriate bodies (unions/charities/employers/employees/academics) to review guidance for employers and employees in this area. Guidance is already in place to request flexible working arrangements this could be extended to encompass remote working.

Is there evidence that some disabled people with remote working arrangements can fall out of work precisely as a result of working remotely – perhaps because their employer treats them different as a result, either intentionally or inadvertently?

- We did not ask this question specifically in our research but remote working can be challenging if not managed carefully by the individual and the line manager/employer.
- Training in developing remote working competencies and digital resilience to support sustainability of remote working and therefore retaining the job was essential (we have developed these competencies in a previous study).
- In our study we found that developing self-efficacy skills including self-care, managing technology and developing trusting relationships related to positive experiences of remote working.

In respect of less visible disabilities, disabled workers would first have to self-disclose to their line manager before being able to request remote working as a reasonable adjustment. Is there any evidence that a reluctance to self-disclose is resulting in some disabled people falling out of employment?

- We did not ask this question specifically in our research but we did find in our study that neurodivergent people were less likely to disclose (request accommodations) and sometimes they did not do so until much later in their career– statistics reveal that some people do not wish to disclose (or feel they cannot) their neurodivergent needs, this can mean that they do not receive appropriate accommodations to support their work.
- In our study we found those that did disclose had some fruitful discussions and found that a mix of remote and hybrid working could help them to sustain their work.
- Agreeing communication preferences, using technology and mix of flexible working styles could provide a supportive work environment.
- The Committee should commission further research into the extent of flexible and remote working among different, marginalised groups (e.g. lower socioeconomic groups, early career workers, those with disabilities and/or neurodivergence), to ensure that all workers can benefit from changes in the law.
- Providing a supportive environment for disclosure to occur was found to help in our study and therefore, increase their chances of gaining appropriate support – including remote working if necessary.
- The literature review suggested that there has been a prevalent focus on remote working as a reasonable adjustment for persons with physical disabilities, with less focus on invisible disabilities.

- It is worth noting that we also found in our literature review that disabled employees were found to **be less likely** than their non-disabled counterparts to work from home due to holding lower-paid and non-managerial jobs.

Are larger employers more likely or willing to agree remote working arrangements? If so, why?

- Our research did not address this question but of those we interviewed, large employers were setting up (or already had in place) employee support groups and some provided 1-2-1 and/or group coaching for neurodivergent workers.
- Clearly resources maybe more limited for smaller employers but additional research would be needed to look at this issue. More resources can help to create more networks involving a wider range of people.
- Access to work can help to support some of this community but is a complex process and could be further simplified.

Those employers we spoke to were keen to support this group of employees and understand how best to implement remote working and to seek to provide guidance. The larger employers had employee support groups and were keen to influence policy and guidance in this area. Some employers provided 1-2-1 and group coaching, whilst other worked with support groups to increase awareness.

Access to Work helped some of our interviewees, others felt they had to get into the inclusion and diversity space to help employers understand their needs – some were involved or led support groups.

To what extent does the type of disability a person has affect their chances of agreeing a remote working as a reasonable adjustment?

As above disclosure is important to gain remote working as a reasonable adjustment – for those that are neurodivergent disclosure can come later in their career and statistics reveal that some people do not wish to disclosure (or feel they cannot) their neurodivergent needs. Providing a supportive environment for disclosure and requests to occur was found to help in our study, and therefore increase their chances of gaining appropriate support – including remote working if necessary.

Recommendations

We encourage the Committee to include the following recommendations in its final report:

1. The Government should work with key stakeholders to clarify guidance on access to remote working for disabled and neurodivergent workers. This could include producing best practice guidance for employers / managers – linking to ACAS and other guidance. It may also be useful to draw on our Line Manager Toolkit for disabled and/or neurodiverse remote workers.
2. Be clear that stigmatising flexible or hybrid working arrangements can disproportionately affect this group who may benefit from them but be inhibited from requesting what they need.
3. The Government should commission research and track how well flexible/remote working is working in practice for marginalised groups.
4. Employers should develop and provide access to training for line managers and competency development (and digital resilience) in remote working for employees (based on Dr Grant's previous research on remote working).

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