ONBOARDING

TOOL 4: BUILDING AN ACCESSIBLE REMOTE ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE

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Who is this for

High priority
- Direct Line Managers

Useful to Know
- DEI and HR professionals

What guidance does it provide?

- Specific considerations for enhancing the accessibility of onboarding policies and practices for all workers, including those with disabilities

Take-home points

- Remote onboarding follows the same process as onboarding on-site – workers still proceed through a series of activities that help them learn about their new workplace, colleagues, and company's values and mission. However, there are key lessons learned from remote work that need to be adapted to when creating an inclusive and accessible remote onboarding experience. Pay close attention to:
  - What work-life balance looks like
  - Are accommodations present, and if so, are they implemented correctly
  - How to optimize engagement
  - Any challenges in communication
- Recognize that there may be an increased need for communication with remote onboarding. By open communication you can learn more about what is working and what is not, if policies need to be adapted, and if there are other supports you can provide such as training, communication tools, and accessible documents

The Remote Onboarding Experience

Before consuming this tool, be sure to read through the Onboarding Tool 3: Creating an Accessible and Inclusive Onboarding Experience [Onboarding Tool 3: Creating an Inclusive In-Person Onboarding Experience].

At the core of it, remote onboarding follows the same process as onboarding on-site – workers still proceed through a series of activities that help them learn about their new workplace, colleagues, and company's values and mission. However, make no mistake, if you neglect to adapt your onboarding process for remote workers, your onboarding efforts will inevitably fall short, and you may risk losing the valuable person you worked so hard to secure.

Lessons Learned from Remote Work

The history of the COVID-19 pandemic has painted a clear picture of how to make work 'work' from home. For many workers with disabilities who had the option, remote work granted them increased flexibility and accessibility: [1], [2]

Physical Environment: Remote work allows an individual to perform their job in an environment that is optimally set up to support their needs. It removes transportation barriers and costs for a person with a disability, including preparation and planning for potentially inaccessible spaces.

Health: Home is a safe and familiar environment. Remote work may reduce feelings of stress or may be more comfortable for people with anxiety or depression.

Productivity: In the office or on site, there are often many distractions that can make it difficult to focus. Neurodiverse workers may find that working from home offers them more control over their work environment and routines, supporting the execution of tasks.

Accessible Technology: Remote work has created a reliance on accessible technology such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, where accessibility features like closed captioning have become built in. Workers can also use their own computer set up with accessible technologies.

Scheduling: Some people with disabilities require support with activities at home. Remote work and the normalization of modified work hours have allowed individuals with disabilities the flexibility to schedule and receive such support within their homes.

Attitudes: New changes in the workplace has prompted a shift towards more flexible mindsets. Employers have learned to be more accommodating of differences, based on the understanding that the pandemic has brought about many challenging situations for workers with and without disabilities.

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THE REMOTE ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE

"We believe extreme flexibility and hybrid work will define the post-pandemic workplace." – Lisa Gibson, Microsoft

Remote settings have proved to be challenging for all types of workers, including people with disabilities. As a manager, keep in mind the types of barriers that workers may be experiencing when onboarding and working remotely:

Lack of work-life balance: For many people, home is not the optimal place to work. Other members of the household can be distracting, or their physical environment may not be conducive to setting up a workstation. The lines between work and home life can become blurred, leading to increased stress and burnout.

Difficulty with Accommodations: With remote work, conducting accommodation assessments to optimize the comfort and performance of workers with disabilities becomes more complicated. For instance, it may be difficult to implement accommodations remotely, or configure workspaces to enhance employee safety due to confinements in space.

Isolation and Less Engagement: There are numerous social benefits of being a part of team. In a virtual setting, it can be difficult for employees to feel included and connected to others, especially if accessibility is not prioritized in other ways and they cannot fully participate (e.g., an employee who is hard of hearing may find participation in virtual meetings difficult).

Challenges with Communication: For many workers with disabilities, tasks and activities are more effectively done in person where communication and collaboration can take place more seamlessly. Things like mentorship, feedback, education, and training often benefit from the creativity, innovation, or problem solving that arise from working together.

Remote workers don't have the opportunity to quickly asking a cubicle-mate a question. So, what needs to change to ensure that remote onboarding experiences are just as inclusive and accessible as in-person orientations that your company has established?

Use what you have. Leverage your existing onboarding materials and work directly with the new employee to tailor the orientation in a way that best suits their needs in a remote setting.

HOW TO ASK ABOUT WORKERS' NEEDS IN A REMOTE SETTING

Your new worker arrives at the job with a wealth of previous experiences – they know their needs best and will tell you how you can support them if you ask. For each new hire, build out your understanding of how they work best at home. Ask them the following questions and remember, one size does not fit all: [3]

Communication Style

- What is the preferred method of communication (e.g., instant chat, email, video call, meeting ect.)?
- How do they best collaborate with others online (e.g., working offline and coming together to discuss, working meetings, ect.)?
- What time of day works best when communicating (e.g., morning, middle of the day, lunch ect.)?

Working Style

- What is the worker's learning style (e.g., visual, auditory, written, etc.)?
- How can an onboarding curriculum be adapted to suit a variety of learners?
- What can you do to support workers' learning styles (e.g., provide quiet and undisturbed focus time)?
- Are there particular working conditions that they most prefer (e.g., flexible hours, work-life balance, hard stop at 5 pm, etc.)?

Supports for Participants

- Do they have everything they need to work from home?
- If challenges exist, how can they overcome?
- What accommodations could be implemented to help them do their best work?

Kaia Malik, Customer Service Representative

My name is Kaia and I work as a customer service representative and administrator in the Financial Sector in Canada. I live with depression and anxiety, and experience barriers related to my mental health in the workplace. For instance, when I work from an office setting, it is often harder to focus. The best scenario for me is to be able to work from home. I find that I thrive the best and am the most productive.

I got hired during the pandemic – I was able to work from home and I successfully completed all my tasks. However, once lockdown ended, my supervisor told me that I needed to return to work in person. I didn't understand why this was being asked because everyone was perfectly comfortable working at home. I would have even been okay with a hybrid model because with my depression, I don't always have to work at home as long as my symptoms are managed.

Initially, when I requested further discussion about a hybrid model, my supervisor told me that we could work together to find an appropriate solution. But after a months passed, nothing had changed. After my 3 months of the probationary, my supervisor unfortunately felt like I was no longer a good fit for the job role and did not want to continue my employment.

Early Discussions about Workplace Accommodations

Managers play an essential role in providing information about the workplace and available supports. This knowledge exchange is critical early in the onboarding process. The Inclusive Workplace has developed an easy to use and practical guide for managing a virtual team. In addition to this resource, here are some other important considerations for supporting new employees who are working from home: [4], [5], [6]

Develop remote workplace policies and practices to enhance accessibility and inclusivity
- Send out a general framework or schedule for onboarding so that the new worker can be prepared for their first few days at work
- Share or develop a remote work policy that covers expected hours of work, expected response time, etc.
- Recognize the remote employee in the context of the "bigger picture" - they need to know how they are making an impact on the larger organization and/or their communities (e.g., through publications, staff meetings, social media posts, etc.)
- New workers may feel deterred from complaining to make a good impression, so integrate multiple, anonymous feedback opportunities to act on employees' suggestions

Establish an accessible workspace at home:
- Ensure that remote workers have the equipment they need to perform their jobs on the first day – essential items may include a laptop, monitor, mouse, and keyboard
- Understand that employees are not expected to front the costs necessary to set up a workspace at home – develop a budget for each remote worker for this purpose
- Provide tax claims for home office expenses
- Provide a list of what office supplies are eligible for coverage, and recommend pre-approved supplies or equipment that have been vetted for accessibility
- Offer to procure pre-approved supplies or equipment for the employee
- Consider provide employees with an ongoing stipend to use toward electricity, internet, phone, and supplies

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR REMOTE WORKERS

Ensure workers have the knowledge and the know-how to work safely from home:
- Offer each new employee training for accessing key technology remotely (i.e., computer or technology literacy) – for example, host a video session with IT professionals to show workers how to use and navigate through the systems and software within your organization
- Provide training in diverse methods, such as self-paced, with support, a reference guide with screen shots or videos, etc.
- Consider offering training on workstation ergonomics and health and safety considerations at home
- Provide virtual workplace assessments so that employees feel confident about their workspace, have the opportunity to voice any questions about health and safety, and discuss the possibility of accommodations to support their participation

Recognize the added importance of communication in remote settings:
- Recognize that there may be an increased need for communication with remote onboarding
- Provide tools for remote employees that enable communication, such as Microsoft Teams or Slack for day-to-day chatting
- Ensure that any communication tools or technology are fully accessible. Learn more in Communication Tool 5 - Improving Your Online Accessibility
- Consider preparing materials specific to the remote work environment such as a manual for virtual etiquette in meetings. For more information, please visit Communication Tool 4 - Hosting Inclusive Virtual Meetings
- Where possible and when appropriate, host regular meetings to debrief and maintain a face-to-face communication
- Identify a dedicated onboarding liaison – someone who can answer questions and provide support for the new employee. If they are not able to answer a specific question, they can direct the new employee to someone who may be able to help them

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR REMOTE WORKERS

Build an inclusive remote workplace culture:
- Consider sending the employee a welcome gift to make them feel a part of the company culture, even when they are working from home
- Foster quality relationships with employees and make time to regularly check on employees – this not only covers their experience in the workplace, but also their mental and physical health
- Launch a workplace mentorship program to provide support and coaching on the job
- Find ways for employees to familiarize themselves with one another and the company's culture, even if they might not be able to be in the same place at the same time
- It is easy for new employees to operate in silos when working remotely – create a series of formal and informal introductions, events, and spaces, across the organization aimed at fostering a sense of community and belongingness
- Ask employees for their feedback and ideas on how you can help them feel more welcome at your company

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