# Imagining Inclusive Workspaces for Disabled People

## Pilot Study Interim Report

Dr Flora Renz
Dr Clare Williams

Kent Law School, University of Kent

We are deeply grateful to the many people who participated in this research project. This research could not have happened without the participants who gave their time to be interviewed, and who helped to disseminate our call for participants. We acknowledge and thank the University of Kent LSSJ Investment in Research Fund for funding this research.

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# Introduction

The pandemic has disabled us all in ways unimaginable just a few years ago, disrupting our routines, curtailing our interactions, and denying us access. For many, this has been a deeply unsettling new reality. But for those with physical impairments or long-term conditions who are accustomed to patterns of exclusion, the 'disabling' of society overnight levelled the playing field.[1] Covid, with its mandatory lockdowns that disabled the rest of society overnight, levelled the playing field, allowing us to glimpse a different, more inclusive, world.[2] The subsequent mass migration to remote working demanded by lockdowns has allowed us to glimpse elements of disability-inclusive best practice. Calls for a 'legal right' to remote working practices imply a power shift from employer to employee about who determines where work tasks are performed, potentially transforming the legal landscape for workplace inclusivity (Eccles and Medding, 2021; Makortoff, 2021).[3]

But there are risks here, too. While remote working opens doors for those with certain impairments, existing research focusing on non-disabled people suggests that those working remotely receive fewer pay raises or promotions, while access to other forms of flexible working such as part-time or job sharing have been minimised (Lund et al., 2018; Eccles and Medding, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2021).

This project asks, therefore:

**How has the shift to remote working during the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted disabled people's experience of employment?**

**Has the pandemic allowed us to discover new best practices for inclusivity and, if so, how can these be embedded as long-lasting workplaces norms?**

Despite numerous studies into remote working, there is relatively little research into how "WFH", remote, or teleworking can address the disability employment gap (Linden, 2014; Linden and Milchus, 2014; Moon et al., 2014; Ahrendt and Patrini, 2020; Schur, Ameri and Kruse, 2020).[4] Additionally, while remote working has been the focus of considerable research recently (Abulibdeh, 2020; Ahrendt and Patrini, 2020), and the social impacts of Covid are widely studied (British Academy, 2021; ESRC, 2021; IPPO, 2021; The Economy 2030 Inquiry: navigating a decade of change, 2021), only small scale

1 We have chosen to use the term "disabled people" rather than person-first language to reflect the social model of disability throughout this report. See Shakespeare and Watson (2002).

2 Up to one third of UK adults have two or more long-term health conditions, and between one in three and one in five is disabled, depending on the definition used (Office for National Statistics, 2019, chap. 8).

3 There is currently a right to request flexible working, but no right to have this request approved and one third of requests are denied "on business grounds" (Eccles and Medding, 2021). Remote working is one type of flexible working (GOV.UK, 2021).

4 "Homeworking" or "WFH", "remote" working, "teleworking" and "telecommuting" are used interchangeably in the literature (ILO and Fundación ONCE, 2021).

studies about the experience of employees with disabilities during the shift to remote working in the pandemic have been carried out so far (Taylor et al, 2022). For those with disabilities, calls for "back to normal" post-pandemic mean little more than "back to exclusion" (Ryan, 2021; CIPD, 2019, 2020). There is a consensus that the challenges of enforced remote working offer a pivotal moment for rethinking disability inclusivity in the workplace.

# Methodology & demographics

Between April and June 2022 we contacted more than 60 Disability Staff Networks and Disabled People's organisations, as well as using social media such as Twitter, to disseminate our call for interview participants. We had initially planned to conduct up to 15 interviews, but found we had exceeded that number on our online booking system in the course of one week, indicating that this was clearly a topic participants were strongly interest in. We consequently carried out 41 semi-structured one-to-one or two-to-one interviews between June and September 2022 that lasted between 60 and120 minutes each, all of which involved participants with physical disabilities, energy limiting conditions, mental health conditions, or who identified as neurodiverse.

The majority of interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams or Zoom and with the video enabled or disabled depending on the participant's preference. Where requested, we offered participants the option to complete the interview in writing rather than verbally. The interviews focused on participants' experiences of remote and hybrid working, any benefits and challenges that emerged since the shift to remote working in 2020, and their views on how working practices should develop in the future.

One interview was subsequently withdrawn, leaving 40 interviews in total. This is a significant increase on the 15 interviews we had initial planned to carry out as part of this pilot study and speaks to the demand for further research on this topic.

As the purpose of this pilot study was primarily to test our hypothesis, namely that the sudden availability of remote and hybrid working would have changed disabled people's experiences of employment, we relied on convenience sampling (Etikan et al 2016). In terms of demographics, our sample consisted of 31 female, 7 male, and 2 non-binary or genderqueer participants. Our sample was predominantly white, with only 5 BAME participants. The majority of participants (25) had a postgraduate qualification, while 14 had an undergraduate qualification, and one had an A-level or equivalent qualification. Geographically, most participants (36) were spread across the UK, with 3 US participants and 1 from India. Due to the choice of recruitment methods there was a high number of participants who were employed in the higher education sector (27), with a further 2 in other parts of the education sector. Additionally, 5 participants worked in the third sector, 2 in human resources, and 1 each in the legal sector, service industry and local government. Age-wise, 18 participants were under 30, 15 were in their 40s, 6 in their 50s and 1 in their 60s. Most participants (26) described themselves as having

a physical impairment, with Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (8) being the most common condition. A further 5 participants described themselves as having some form of neurodiversity, while 3 were hard of hearing or d/Deaf, 2 had a mental health condition, and 4 participants had multiple impairments.

# Emerging findings

In this section we will briefly discuss the themes that have emerged across the interviews. These have been identified in part to provide a basis for the next stage of the project, which will involve the coding of interview transcripts and in-depth analysis.

## 1. Positive perceptions of work and working environments

One of the most notable themes emerging from the interviews was how much remote and hybrid working had improved participants' experience of working and often also their actual performance. "When we started working from home it was literally life changing. I was suddenly outperforming my whole team". A number of participants credited the shift to remote working with significant advances in their career progression, with several participants taking on entirely new tasks, roles, or increasing their hours in some cases from part-time to full time, noting that "Professionally, working from home has been fantastic for me". In some cases this was primarily due to benefits of remote working discussed above, in others this was specifically due to the shift to an online mode of engagement. As one participant put it, "I feel more confident speaking with unfamiliar people online". This positive impact was often challenging for participants to talk about, as it happened against the backdrop of a global pandemic that for a majority of people, even if they were not affected by Covid themselves, had significant negative impacts. In turn this meant that many participants felt that prior to the interview they had been unable to discuss the inclusion benefits they had experienced due to Covid as this might have been perceived as insensitive to others.

Work, beyond the obvious financial benefits, was clearly important to participants in part because some felt their life was otherwise dominated by their impairment. As one participant described their reason for returning to work, "I wanted a sense of purpose again […] I would go insane if I didn't work." As such, making working environments more accessible has not only clear economic, but also social and psychological benefits.

## 2. Failures to make reasonable adjustments prior to the Covid-19 pandemic

Perhaps the least surprising theme emerging from the interviews was how often participants had been refused reasonable adjustments in the past. Even when adjustments had been implemented, participants still felt that, in their own words they had to engage in 'emotional labour' to have adjustments put in place. In particular, only a very small sub-set of participants had been able to successfully request the ability to work remotely prior to February 2020. Even when participants had been able to work remotely this often clashed with existing workplaces norms that demanded a physical presence in the workplace and synchronous working practices/hours. This meant that while

the sudden shift to remote working was generally welcomed, many participants felt frustrated that something that had previously been seen as entirely unfeasible by managers had overnight become the new normal. In the words of one participant, “All the time they said it wasn’t possible was a lie, because as soon as Covid hit it was possible”. This for some participants led to somewhat conflicted feelings about the ability to work remotely, with one participant noting that “It’s almost bittersweet seeing that it [remote working] is possible.”

## 3. Similarities of experiences across impairment groups

Although participants had a vast range of impairments, the similarities across different impairments in the context of remote and hybrid working were immediately noticeable. One particular aspect of this was the fact that remote or hybrid working enabled participants to ‘save’ energy that would have otherwise been spent on commuting, navigating access barriers, and working in environments that did not meet physical/sensory/psychological needs. This was regardless of whether participants had an impairment that is traditionally considered “energy limiting” (see Hale et al 2020) or a condition that is not medically associated with fatigue. This meant both that participants had more energy to expend on work (see theme 1, above), but also that people were able to engage in domestic, social or family activities, which had often not been possible prior to remote working. As one participant expressed, “I was just working and my home life was just non-existent”. Similarly, another participant noted that “I would not do anything on my weekends, I would just lie on my couch to recover”. As such, the shift to remote working for many meant a greatly increased sense of wellbeing, or in the words of one participant, “I feel like I’m on vacation”.

In some cases, the shift to remote working was the first time participants realised how much energy they had been expending on navigating inaccessible environments. “Realising how different things could be made me realise ‘This is better!’.” Or as another participant put it, “It’s like being in a parallel universe, a parallel energy universe”. Remote working also made it possible to overcome stigma against energy limiting conditions in particular, which one participant characterised as being “perceived as a problem” prior to the pandemic due to their impact on working patterns.

The shift to remote working in some cases also allowed participants to manage their impairments better. This was in part because they no longer had to make their needs or adjustments visible to colleagues. As one participant noted, “You don’t want people to wonder why you are under your duvet”. Another participant had developed “stealth stims” she could do without being visible on camera to manage anxiety and another had started to put her adjustment needs in her email signature.

## 4. Social contact and remote working

In a strong divergence from non-disabled people’s perception of remote working, a significant proportion of participants felt the shift to remote working had increased the amount of social contact they had both in and outside work. One participant noted that “The move to online

and also hybrid stuff means that I am more included". Additionally, "I found it great because everything was suddenly much more accessible". Similarly, "Working from home with my team gave me a sense of comfort and stability, which I really needed". "My colleagues became my friends because these sort of barriers we had disappeared."

However, this was not the case for all participants, with some feeling that in-person contact was something they had missed during the time period where remote working was the only option: "I need to be able to come in. […] I wanted that social contact." This seemed to be a particular issue for those who started new roles or moved to a new team and felt they had missed "having the freedom to integrate a bit". Or in the words of another participants: "It's been a lot more difficult during the pandemic to stay in touch and make new work friends. It's also felt like when working remotely, people see a lot more of the work I do than they see of the person I am, so the work/private identities have been a bit more split up that way."

## 5. Limitations of remote working

While participants generally saw an improvement in their workplace inclusion through online or remote working, there were some general areas that tended to be less amenable to remote working, such as building or developing team relations and getting to know colleagues. This problem was especially acute where participants had recently changed jobs and needed to get to know their team from scratch.

The need to intentionally set aside time to have those 'water cooler' moments came through repeatedly, whereby participants noted that online meetings for small talk, the "soft work" that occurs naturally in a situation of co-presence, required forethought and intention, and needed to be deliberately scheduled in (Thompson, 2021). As one participant described it, "we have to be more intentional around social events, even though, you know, they're not all going out drinking. But we have to have that thought around. How do we bring people together? So there's been a, you know, a spring party. There's gonna be a summer party, whereas normally we'd have a barbecue on our terrace every single week at the summer to keep bringing people together in different ways. We've had to think, how do we have one event that brings everyone together?".

Some businesses had settled on a system of hybrid working with 'anchor days', which demanded everyone to be physically present on a specific day of the week, where "[…]they are doing more to encourage people in so they do, you know, free breakfasts on anchor Wednesdays and making sure that the catering team is in on those days, you know, making cakes every day, that kind of thing". Others left it up to teams or individuals to figure out their own working patterns, and the result was that while some participants found their quality of life and health improved, their work-based relationships became trickier to manage. Some found this troubling, however others found this liberating.

Participants also noted that equipment to enable home working needed to be provided by their employer, and that this could sometimes take a significant amount of time and effort or

was not always fit for purpose. As one participant noted, “It was a disaster. The ability to connect remotely to the workplace, to the data I needed to use to the computer that they’d let me take home was really slow. The connection was very slow. So, like, it was literally to the point of  I’m trying to work on remote server and I’d like click a button and I’d have to wait 50 seconds before the key press would register on the other computer I was connecting to and it was just like this is not manageable. I can’t. I can’t do anything at any speed”.

## 6. Role of managers

The role of managers in creating an inclusive workplace environment was a theme that a number of participants touched upon. Those who had positive experiences with line managers who made adjustments when requested often described themselves repeatedly as ‘lucky’, suggesting that this is still not perceived as the norm. Where managers were not receptive to requests for adjustments, this often made participants feel frustrated, and disempowered, with participants noting “I work entirely on-site and I have no agency over how I do my work, which is very different from my previous [hybrid format] roles”.

Reluctance or refusal to make adjustments was also perceived by participants as being based on stereotyping of disabled or chronically ill people. “When you’re too confident they don’t believe you need help, because they equate needing help with being really unwell”. As one participant highlighted, having a new supportive manager meant they were finally able to carry out their role as intended, stating that “All that happened with my work is that people are putting fewer barriers in my way”.

Similarly, “as people come more and more back into the office it is perhaps easier for people to forget about you”, highlighting the need for managers to remain aware of remote colleagues’ training and development needs, as well as their ongoing integration in the team.

## 7. New workplace norms

Several participants also highlighted that the pandemic had led to a shift in workplace norms more generally. For example, one effect of the pandemic as characterised by a participant was that “everyone is very tuned in to vulnerability in a way that they weren’t before, or maybe were not able to see”. This shift led to a greater appreciation of employees and colleagues as people all of whom had differing vulnerabilities and needs that should be respected in the workplace.

Of course, the most notable new practice has been the introduction of software packages that make online meetings and participations more accessible for everyone. “The acceptance of online meetings and interaction is for me really what has come out of the pandemic”. One particular benefit of this has also been the normalisation of automatic live captioning that does not require a person to provide the captions. Several participants highlighted that the use of captions had drastically improved their ability to interact with colleagues, with one participant noting “I realised how much better I was able to interact in meetings”.

These shifts in workplace norms, in turn, also seem to have created a climate in which job applicants can more easily ask for adjustments for interviews without fearing that they will be penalised. As one participant involved in re-

cruitment described it, “I don’t know if people feel more comfortable asking [for adjustments] because they are in their home space, but we have had a lot more requests for adjustments for interviews”.

### 8. Need for guidance around reasonable adjustments

In some workplaces and for some participants the pandemic also served as a trigger for re-evaluating reasonable adjustments more generally and either their own failure to ask for these or managements’ failures to offer suitable adjustments. For instance, one participant stated that “I had never seriously thought of it [flexible working] before”. While the pandemic suddenly highlighted that this was in fact a viable and valuable option for them, uncertainty around adjustments was a particular challenge for those with variable conditions. As one participant put it, “We don’t cater well to fluctuating conditions” where employees may need different adjustments at different points in time. The failure on behalf of managers to offer suitable adjustments was generally not attributed to prejudice or malice, but rather that “they just don’t know [how to respond to such situations]”.

## Next Steps

We would like to reiterate our gratitude to all those who took part in the project and shared with us their experiences and insights of remote and hybrid working throughout the pandemic. We plan to develop the project over the coming months, beginning with full and detailed transcription, coding, and analysis of the interview data. This will lead to further publications, details of which can be found on the project website.

We are planning Roundtable event in Autumn 2022 to discuss initial project fundings with interested academics, NGOs and policy experts, and details of the event, along with outcomes and findings will be shared on the project website.

We welcome contributions from those with an interest in the research. Please contact us at:

F.Renz@kent.ac.uk

C.Williams-678@kent.ac.uk

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