

# Adjust Our Workplaces 2021

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**Microlink has a proud history of supporting Business Disability Forum in working for the inclusion of disabled people in the workplace(s). This fantastic guide will help employers to harness the full potential of every employee when businesses return to the “new normal” post COVID-19.**

**Supporting your disabled employees is NOT just the right thing to do for their wellbeing and inclusion BUT it is also the Business Smart thing to do – I hope this guide will help you to be Disability Smart and to support all of your team to perform at their best.**

**Dr Nasser Siabi OBE, CEO, Microlink PC (UK) Ltd**

**Workplace adjustments are at the heart of disability inclusion. They are fundamental to productivity, wellbeing and feeling valued. Often, effective workplace adjustments are the difference between someone thriving or simply surviving at work – or worse, falling out of the workplace altogether.**

**I would like to thank everyone who has given their time to contribute to our Great Big Workplace Adjustments Report and to thank our long-standing friend and partner Microlink for their generous support.**

**Diane Lightfoot, CEO, Business Disability Forum**

## Adjust Our Workplaces 2021

**“Everyone’s experience is different but equally as important.”**

In 2019, with the support of our Partner Microlink, Business Disability Forum released our ground-breaking report on “The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey”. It was based on a year spent listening to and analysing the stories and experiences of employees, people managers, senior leaders and other stakeholders when interacting with workplace adjustments processes and talking about getting disability related workplace support put in place.

The report built on the evidence base for many messages that Business Disability Forum has held crucial for many years. These include that:

- Everyone’s experience is different but equally as important
- Business processes should not rely on medical diagnosis or labelling; and
- Employers must ensure their policies on paperwork for everyone in practice.

Two years on, our world has turned upside down. Since the start of the pandemic, we have all been living and working in a way that few – if any – of us could ever have imagined. Businesses across all sectors have had to adapt, overnight, how they operate. Some are surviving. Some are thriving. But, as we begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel, what does this all mean for the disabled people they employ?

Business Disability Forum’s 350+ members employ an estimated 20 per cent of the UK workforce and 8 million people worldwide. Back in April 2020, at the start of the pandemic, we asked them how they are responding to the unprecedented challenges of Covid-19 and for their early thoughts on its legacy for the future of work for disabled people – and indeed us all.

## Adjust our homes

Pre-COVID-19, working from home was the most frequently requested workplace adjustment. But as homes became the new workplace for many, our members reported some logistical challenges.

Our survey revealed issues around provision and portability, setup of equipment, and ensuring effectiveness – and availability – of adjustments as well as the challenges of having accurate data on who has a disability and reaching out to them to provide support.

Respondents told us that their focus was on:

- Reviewing routine working hours to enable effective working from home (**67 per cent**).
- Supporting colleagues with assistive technology (**64 per cent**).
- Helping colleagues install video conferencing applications (**61 per cent**).
- Working out which adjustments such as assistive technology, specialist chairs or other equipment could be transported to the homes of employees (**60 per cent**).

Visibility and presence of senior leaders was an encouraging theme. Whilst responses to our survey reveal a cross-organisation effort to support disabled colleagues, decisions are generally being made at the most senior, strategic level. 83 per cent said that how the business has responded to Covid-19 generally – including arranging internal communications, home working, and ensuring staff have the adjustments they need – was being led by the Chief Operating Officer or Chief Executive.

Whilst the figure for responsibility for ensuring staff with disabilities and long-term conditions specifically could move to home working was much lower – 31 per cent said this was the direct responsibility of the COO or CEO as compared to 69 per cent for HR – this is still encouraging.

We see time and time again that CEOs or senior leaders who have a personal knowledge of and interest in disability issues – perhaps because of their own experience or that of a close family member – are champions in driving change. Giving senior leaders direct visibility of the issues facing their disabled employees should have a lasting and positive impact.

**And, encouragingly, even in this brave new world of work, the key findings from our report still hold true:**

### **Focus on barriers, not conditions**

Many employees who are working with adjustments do not yet know they have a condition, or what the name of that condition is. Employers need to work faster than medical diagnostic processes can to ensure they are providing effective support to employees.

Focusing on medical ‘proof’ or relying on an employee having a neat ‘label’ for their experience is unhelpful, slows down the process of that employee getting support, and is unrealistic; it does not reflect the reality of ‘becoming’ disabled or acquiring a condition. How are you ensuring that everyone who needs adjustments is getting them, without relying on the employee having a diagnosis or a ‘name’ for their disability or condition?

### **A good process on paper does not necessarily equal a good experience for employees**

Processes are about people. If the people processes are not designed and revised in a way that includes the input of those stakeholders, the process is likely to feel ‘alien’ and not reflective of ‘where the person is’. How have you included the feedback and experiences of disabled employees and employees with conditions in the process revision and improvement?

## **“Focus on barriers, not conditions.”**

### **Business talk rarely reflects employee experience**

Profession-specific jargon and terminology is understood and can be helpful when working within profession-specific frameworks (such as inclusion, HR, or business management).

However, that language is rarely effective when transferred into communications about processes that are for employees. Many employees say the language used in workplace adjustments processes is often legal and HR-centric.

If employees do not understand the terminology you are using, they are less likely to think this process or support applies to them. Do not let your language distance yourself from those you are trying to support.

As an example, the term “reasonable” defines an employer’s process, yet reasonableness is not the employee’s concern. Employees with disabilities and conditions often do not engage or are not familiar with legal terms.

How does the language you use in your processes reflective the supportive tone that you want to get across to employees?

### **Adjustments do not remove barriers to inclusion elsewhere in the organisation**

We heard from employees that the adjustments often remove all barriers in their own job and immediate working area (such as their desk or office area) but having these adjustments does not equate to an inclusive organisation more widely.

Other factors in wider workplace present barriers that adjustments do not address. These include:

- attitudes from managers
- harassment from colleagues
- access to learning and development opportunities
- opportunities for promotion and progression
- perceptions about ability and disability in management and senior management
- the perception of how much of a priority disability and workplace support is at senior and board level in the organisation.

How are you identifying the barriers disabled employees and employees with conditions experience beyond their immediate role and area of work, and how are you removing those barriers?

### **When adjustments – the right adjustments – are in place, employees stay in their job, are productive, and are happy**

An employer's duty to make adjustments in the Equality Act 2020 is an ongoing one. This means employers need to ensure that, even after adjustments are provided and in place, they keep checking that those adjustments continue to remove the barriers the employee was experiencing.

Many employees in this research told us this rarely happens. Not only is there a legal risk to the employer here, but the retention, productivity, and happiness of the employee is also compromised if the adjustments provided do not work (or no longer work).

How do you know these reviews are consistently taking place in your organisation, and how do you equip managers to initiate and undertake them effectively and at appropriate periods?

**“Processes are about people.”**

## Moving post-pandemic

Of course, in the current climate, we are all working with adjustments to a greater or lesser extent and surely one positive legacy of the pandemic that we are facing will be a much deeper acceptance and appreciation of the role of home and flexible working and the use of assistive technology in the workplace.

Even back in April 2020, our respondents were positive about the potential for long-lasting benefits:

- **90 per cent** agreed that responses to Covid-19 will result in a lasting change in attitudes to flexible and home working.
- **63 per cent** recognised the increased demand in adjustments for all staff to enable them to work in a new way.

They also told us that they were already training their teams on how to manage remotely in anticipation of a blended or hybrid model of work.

We believe that we have a once in a generation opportunity to build an economy of work that works for everyone – to reimagine and redesign what work looks like. We have been trying to shift the dial on disability employment for ever – maybe COVID-19 presents us with the unique set of circumstances that we need to embed lasting change. Some of the positives we have seen during the pandemic have included a kindness and sense of community and perhaps a softer more empathetic style of leadership. These are elements we very much hope we can hold onto. But what does “Building Back Better” look like in the context of workplace adjustments?



## Best of both or worst of both?

Many businesses are planning for a blended or hybrid future of work: partly in the office and partly at home.

In principle, this has many benefits in terms of work/life balance and managing travel time whilst also enabling social interaction and team building. But what does that mean for people who work with adjustments? The risk of is that such a well-meaning practice could result in disabled people who need physical adjustments – tech or other kit - having to choose between having the adjustments they need at home **or** at work. This is likely to resulting in at best a sub-optimal working environment or at worst, a dangerous one. Unless someone is working with a very small piece of kit – an ergonomic mouse for example – they are unlikely to be portable. Even a laptop (for example with specific assistive software installed) or an adapted keyboard is not necessarily a reasonable thing to require an employee to move between environments. And even if it is, what message does that send to your disabled employees about how you value them?

So, before implementing a hybrid model for working, think about how you will ensure that employees have the adjustments they need in **all locations** where they work? This may have budget implications – and cost is one of the measures to use in determining whether an adjustment is reasonable – but remember that these may be offset by in savings in office, heating, lighting, and other costs. And to create a situation where a disabled employee must choose to work full time at home or at work risks being deemed discriminatory if non-disabled colleagues are able to move freely and effectively between locations.

Remember too that whilst working from home was the most frequently requested adjustment pre COVID-19, it is not a panacea. Not all disabled people want to work from home all or even part of the time. Isolation (and the very real impact that is having on our collective mental health), juggling care responsibilities, the need for work/home separation, the lack of an optimal working at home base or simply wanting to mix with colleagues are all just as real issue for disabled people as they are for their non-disabled peers. It is vital that employees enable the same opportunities for their disabled employees to return to the workplace as they do for everyone else. Even more importantly, it is imperative that a hybrid model and a greater acceptance of home working must not be an excuse to do nothing – for example, not making an office location accessible to a wheelchair user because “they can just work from home”. Equal access for all must continue to be a priority.

It's also important that senior leaders practise what they preach. If you are asking your teams to work partly at home and partly in the office, then it is important that you do too – even if you might prefer to be in the office full time and have the space and resources to do so. Otherwise, the message that you are sending with your action risks seriously undermining what you are telling your team.

## A Team or B Team?

Equally, we must be careful not to create a two-tier workforce – those who are in the office and those who are not.

This is important for everyone but especially so for disabled colleagues who may be more likely to be the ones remaining at home and missing out on the interaction, social aspects, and information-gathering through “weak ties” that their office-based counterparts will be re-connect with. Some of our Members are starting “random coffees” – generating a random person in the organisation with whom to schedule a 15-minute coffee break – and to talk about the same things as you might next to the kettle or water cooler such as dogs, kids, holidays, and hobbies.

Most people reading this will probably have been in a meeting where most participants are in the room and a few at the end of a speaker phone and remember the challenge for the meeting chair in including them equally (or forgetting them altogether). Many of our Members and Partners work globally and we have seen from our own Global Taskforce how moving to online meetings has encouraged and enabled much greater participation across country boundaries and even time zones. Others are telling us that they do not plan to go back to large in person meetings to avoid that two-tier effect but to mandate that meetings of more than, say, 4 or 5 people, are automatically held online. Shared agendas and documents that everyone can add to even if they cannot attend a particular meeting and daily documentation to communicate and cascade what has been discussed can make a huge difference – as the saying goes “the faintest pencil is sharper than any memory” and communicating as widely as possible can help those who are not in the office feel included and valued.

## Don't slip back – and don't assume

Some of the adjustments we have been forced to put in place because of the pandemic also have wider benefits for disabled people.

As well as avoiding a “two tiers” scenario in meetings, using digital platforms have offered wider benefits – built in captioning to support people who are Deaf or hearing impaired with accuracy improving all the time; recording features to allow people to listen to a discussion at a time that suits them – or to relisten to support retention of information. They also offer different ways of engaging and interacting with content – people who may not feel comfortable speaking in public for whatever reason have the option to use an in-meeting chat for comments and participation or simply to “like” comments as a way of engaging in a discussion. People with neurodiverse conditions for example, may prefer to participate with their camera off or to post their views via a chat function, rather than verbally. Indeed, there are many reasons why people may not wish to turn their cameras on and that should be respected, though importantly needs to be balanced with the needs of anyone who relies on lipreading to support understanding.

Conversely, the sound quality that is available through a head set and a digital platform can be helpful for people with some types of levels of hearing loss or who struggle to concentrate, in comparison to real life meetings where background noise, several people talking or a distracting environment can compromise participation.

And, with the return to an office environment, it may be tempting to slip back into old habits – the “walk and talk” meeting or the meeting in the pub! But these are likely to exclude many more people than you realise. More people than you realise may struggle with mobility, fatigue, and pain when walking (even if you are not aware that they do) or will be unable to hear you or to lip read unless they are facing you or right next to you (and let's face it, that's in addition to the privilege or hierarchy of being next to the boss) or be straining to hear in a noisy environment. Either way, they are likely to be expending their energy on covering or concealing their difficulty rather than on solving the problem in hand. Equally importantly, what message are you sending around inclusion and what you value?

## What's in a number?

With the current – and ongoing debate on data and workforce monitoring it is worth pondering that adjustments are perhaps the truest measure of inclusion?

Certainly, in trying to glean an accurate picture of who is in your workforce, triangulating “disclosure” rates with adjustments can help you get a more rounded picture; after all, many people with a long-term condition may not identify with the term “disabled” but still need adjustments. Remember too that inclusive design and processes and flexible policies reduce the need for individual adjustments (though some will always be needed) and that both the least and the most inclusive businesses may have the lowest declaration rates. The former because employees do not believe that coming forward will, at best, result in any benefit for them or worse, result in detriment. The latter because the inbuilt processes and practices and culture of the organisation is such that they simply do not need to. Which organisation would you rather be?

In our Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey, 34 per cent of those without adjustments said they did not make requests because they were worried their employer might treat them differently. Put another way, that's over a third of the workforce that is not working as effectively or being as productive as they could be simply because they are too afraid to ask for what they need.

We really hope that this paper and the findings The Great Big Workplace Survey can help you revise your own processes and improve staff experiences of engaging with and using them. We hope it will also help shape a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture for everyone.

**“We must all challenge each other to be better and to do more. You never know when you might need that support and how it can drastically improve your quality of life and even be enough to save your life...”**

**We have a choice. We can provide a space for hope, healing, and transformation inclusive for all to equally thrive.”**

Research participant, The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey

## Where to start?

If you are reading this resource and are wondering where next and where to start, then you have come to the right place! We have lots of resources to help you including:

- Our **People Manager Toolkit**, also kindly sponsored by Microlink, with a dedicated section on Workplace Adjustments and information that will be useful for HR and D&I professionals and senior leaders as well as People Managers.
- Our **COVID-19 Toolkit** which has a wealth of information on supporting disabled colleagues back to the workplace – plus lots of advice on supporting disabled customers.
- Our **Advice Service** offers Business Disability Forum Partners and Members a dedicated and confidential expert advice line on everything to do with disability inclusion as it affects business – including on workplace adjustments.
- Our Partner **Microlink** is the UK's leading Workplace Adjustment and Assistive Technology Partner and can provide a wide range of productivity tools and solutions for people with disabilities and health conditions in work. Visit [www.microlinkpc.com](http://www.microlinkpc.com) to find out more.

Business Disability Forum is committed to ensuring that all its products and services are as accessible as possible to everyone. If you wish to discuss anything with regard to the accessibility of this document please contact us.

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