

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar Anabledd a Chyflogaeth

This response was submitted to the Equality and Social Justice Committee consultation on Disability and Employment

DE04

Ymateb gan: Dr Christine Grant | Response from: Dr Christine Grant



Evidence submitted to the Senedd Equality and Social Justice Committee inquiry into the Disability, Employment and Payment Gap

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by

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About the Remote4All Research Project

This evidence is informed by our research exploring 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 UK working population, to work in a way that best supports their needs and capabilities. This qualitative study found that remote working is largely a positive adjustment for many and can help to gain and sustain employment.

The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through the [Digital Futures at Work Research Centre](#) (Digit), which is co-led by the University of Sussex and the University of Leeds Business Schools. The Centre investigates how digital technologies are changing work and the implications for employers, workers, job seekers and governments.

Our response to:

- **What further policy measures are needed to support disabled people, young disabled people and employers to increase participation rates and what can be learned from elsewhere.**

Key findings from our research:

- Our research found that remote working was largely considered as an essential reasonable adjustment for disabled and/or neurodivergent workers to sustain and gain employment. It also increased participation rates. **For**

some employment would not be possible without the option to remote work either partially or fully.

- The Remote4All project found a substantial gap in academic knowledge on disabled and/or neurodivergent people's experience of remote e-working.
- The limited research has mostly focused on physical disabilities, overlooking other invisible disabilities and neurodivergence. Interviews with employees, employers, and stakeholders provided rich data to enhance the knowledge base in this area when related to remote working.
- There is 'no one size fits all' approach and it is essential to listen and understand the individual needs to make remote working accessible and optimal for everyone.
- Line Managers were identified as having a pivotal role in promoting inclusiveness, and therefore, need to be trained effectively.

Key Recommendations:

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

1. **Update guidance on remote working to include consideration of invisible disabilities.** The Welsh Government should work with key stakeholders to further develop and clarify guidance on access to remote working for disabled and/or neurodivergent workers. The current Welsh guidance on remote working (Supporting disabled employees, July 2024) does not cover advice for invisible disabilities including neurodivergent remote workers. The guidance could include best practice for employers. The People's Employment Champions on the skills gateway could be expanded to include information and guidance about the benefits of remote working.
2. **Encourage best practice as described in our Line Manager Toolkit for disabled and/or neurodiverse remote workers** (currently being developed by Dr Grant). Our research found a considerable and important gap in the skills, knowledge and attitudes of line managers and the best way in which they can develop understanding, empathy and support for disabled and/or neurodivergent remote workers.
3. **Combat remote working stigma.** Policymakers should be aware that stigmatising flexible or remote working arrangements can disproportionately affect this group who may be inhibited from requesting what they need. Our research found that attitudes towards flexible and remote working as an adjustment varied between organisations and line managers. Many disabled and/or neurodivergent employees felt they could not ask for the amount of remote working they truly required. Many suffered in silence, rather than risk of losing their job as a result of asking to increase time spent working remotely.
4. **The Welsh Government should work with the UK Government to commission research and track how well remote working is working in practice for marginalised groups.** Our research found that some disabled and/or neurodivergent remote workers found that obtaining remote working as an adjustment was challenging due to their line manager's lack of awareness about the benefits of remote working. By providing impact studies this would enable employers to understand better the benefits and to support this group when

requesting remote working as an adjustment in line with the Disability Confident Scheme that recommends supportive working practices. Based on our findings Government to issue a public/employer information campaign on the benefits of remote working for all population and for specific marginalised groups working with industry bodies to disseminate training/awareness.

5. **Encourage employers to provide training for line managers and competency development (digital resilience) in remote working for employees.** We found that managers often lacked expertise in managing remote working and developing key competencies for employees and line managers was found to be missing. Improving skills would support more effective implementation of remote working as a reasonable adjustment and ameliorate some of the less positive impacts of remote working such as helping to address the potential for social isolation, which can be amplified for disabled and/or neurodivergent workers.

Supporting Evidence: Remote4All Research Project

1. How can remote working make a difference to the employment of disabled people?

- Our research shows remote working can make a huge difference for many, enabling disabled and/or neurodivergent people to gain and sustain employment. **For some employment would not be possible without it.**
- ***“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.
- 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).

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. Requesting remote working as an accommodation was sometimes generated stigma for those requesting this arrangement. Post-pandemic remote working has become a more acceptable working arrangement for many organisations (depending on the role) and has reduced the stigma attached to this style of working, helping to level the playing field for all workers.

However, our review of the academic literature revealed that disabled employees were less likely to work from home. This is due to the fact that they hold more lower-paid and non-managerial jobs, compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

Remote working can enable disabled and/or neurodivergent people to better manage their resources (e.g., pacing for chronic illness and for neurodivergent people) including working time, work environment and self-efficacy. Organisations need to support disabled and/or neurodivergent remote workers by 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. Recuperation from work is necessary to maintain wellbeing; in our study we found that some interviewees worked longer hours. While this occurs for all groups of remote workers it is amplified for this group of remote workers.

It is also important to note that remote working is not the solution for everyone in this group. Our study found that some people worked better in an office environment, where peer support was available to them and they could have more informal conversations.

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 were neurodivergent. Productivity in our study was found to relate to positive coping, regular line manager check-ins and visibility-supporting positive coping mechanisms.

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

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 and sustain employment by agreeing and discussing their work arrangements with their line manager and feeling safe to disclose any requirements and accommodations needed.

Line managers are key to supporting remote working arrangements through checking in regularly for health/well-being, reviewing performance and measuring outputs rather than inputs to ensure sustainability.

2. How can remote working help to increase disability employment and job retention rates?

- We found evidence that remote working created a more sustainable working environment, increasing participation in work and 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 important.

3. How important is the role of line managers in supporting disabled and/or remote workers?

- 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 found a reported lack of knowledge and awareness in line management, particularly for working with neurodivergent workers.
- Dr Grant currently has further funding to develop a line manager toolkit for remote disabled and/or neurodivergent workers.

Line manager support 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 line managers took time to listen and understand their needs as individuals. For this group, a tailored approach to remote working is helpful, ensuring that the positive effects are realised and any negative aspects are minimised and managed well.

We also found relationships between openness and disclosure and 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 they need.

4. 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.
- There may be financial barriers for employers who are unable to fund equipment through the Access to Work scheme – this funding can also be very delayed in providing support to employees.

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 interviewees 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.

A culture of psychological safety including openness, trust need to be in place 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.

5. How can guidance for employers be improved?

Improved support and guidance for employers could help to support expansion of opportunities for remote working for people with disabilities and/or neurodivergence. Guidance should address the following:

- Employers/line managers need to review the job description and role requirements carefully with the individual.
- Discuss how the role can work effectively with some or all remote working as an adjustment.
- 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.
- Preparing line managers to have supportive conversations is vital to consider how the role can be adapted (if necessary) to remote working.
- Provide more knowledge about needs, adjustments and options to line managers to build employer confidence.
- Dr Grant is currently working on a Line Manager tool kit for disabled workers (with key stakeholders) that aims to help develop confidence.
- Access to work can help to support some of this community but is a complex process and could be further simplified. Many of our participants found this a lengthy process.
- 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 digital resilience competencies including self-efficacy skills including self-care, managing technology and developing trusting relationships related to positive experiences of remote working.

6. How well does remote working function as an adjustment work for those with an invisible disability?

Our study found 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.
- 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.