

Remote Work and Disability Inclusion: Navigating the New Normal

Three years have passed since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, reshaping our daily lives and giving rise to an unforeseen revolution in the employment landscape. While lockdowns, quarantines, and restrictions on movement forced people worldwide to adapt to remote work, it's worth noting that the concept of hybrid or remote employment was not unfamiliar to the disabled community. Long before the pandemic, individuals with disabilities championed the benefits of remote work. They saw it as a way to enhance their participation in the workforce while boosting efficiency and effectiveness. With the sudden onset of the pandemic, when companies worldwide were forced to adapt to remote work to ensure continuity of business and the safety of employees, it just proved that it never was an impossible task.

According to Sandeep Kanabar, a Lead Software Engineer, working from home offers him unparalleled flexibility. Sandeep has profound hearing loss, and working remotely means he no longer must tirelessly lip-read during group meetings. Live captioning and transcripts have given him newfound freedom, eliminating the need to rely on colleagues for summaries of conversations.

But Sandeep is not alone in reaping the rewards of increased accessibility in the virtual work environment. It alleviated physical barriers for some and eliminated the daily commute, a welcome relief for many individuals with motor disabilities. It blurred geographical boundaries, granting access to a wider spectrum of job opportunities that aligned with an individual's skills and interests. According to a study by [Upwork](#), by the year 2025, 36.2 million Americans, approximately 22% of the workforce, will be working remotely. Additionally, another [study](#) points out that 71% of all employers claimed that they offer flexible scheduling to more workers than they did before the pandemic. A [study](#) by the Economic Innovation Group found that in the second quarter of 2022, persons with disabilities aged 25 to 54 are more likely to be employed compared to before the pandemic. These statistics are indicative of a noticeable shift in the employment landscape for people with disabilities, suggesting that remote work has opened new opportunities. Studies even suggested that working from home improved employees' mental well-being. This flexibility is a significant boon for individuals with disabilities who often require customized work arrangements.

However, like all things in life, remote work is not without its challenges. Remote work gave rise to new challenges like increased social isolation, identifying reliable technology, the need for new accommodations and stress. For instance, to compensate for technological limitations, such as audio lags, and difficulties in maintaining eye contact with the speaker while lip reading, people with hearing disabilities had to deal with fatigue and stress. While Sandeep said he rarely faced such problems, he did acknowledge that some people in the deaf community found communication gaps that led to them not being able to bond with their teammates.

Is it then reasonable to assert that remote work, brought by the pandemic, has expanded opportunities for individuals with disabilities? Have employers embraced these accommodations? Nitu Choubey, an HR professional, suggests that an important change brought by the pandemic was a shift in mindset. Before the pandemic, when companies considered hiring individuals with disabilities, their primary concern often revolved around whether they possessed the necessary infrastructure to accommodate them. However, as all

work moved to virtual spaces, these concerns became less relevant, and the primary focus shifted towards individuals' knowledge and skills. Nitu mentions that it's not that companies are unwilling to employ individuals with disabilities; rather more sensitization and awareness are needed. Thus, a significant change, in her perspective, lies in companies being more receptive to hiring diverse talents and transcending a person's disability when making hiring decisions. Sandeep highlights that growing dependence on remote work has also heightened the importance of accessibility, prompting companies to prioritize accessibility as an essential aspect of employee support, while also providing reasonable accommodations.

In conclusion, remote work's impact has been bittersweet for individuals with disabilities. The diverse nature of disabilities means that the required accommodations and experiences vary significantly from one person to another. While it would be easy to claim that remote work has universally improved employment prospects, for all individuals with disabilities, it's undeniable that it has brought about significant positive changes for those who rely on these accommodations. As we navigate this new normal, it is essential to continue promoting inclusivity, understanding the varying needs of individuals with disabilities, and striving for a workplace where diversity is celebrated, and barriers are shattered.