Balancing Acts in Hybrid Work: Insights from Employees with Disabilities and Managers on Flexibility and Fairness

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Abstract

Hybrid work has advantages for everyone, but especially for employees with disabilities. Companies are grappling with the tension between work flexibility as a "nice to have" element for all and a reasonable accommodation for some, without creating perceptions of unfairness. In a survey of 100 managers and 100 employees with disabilities, we explore a sample of voices on the topic and then address possible paths forward for creating equitable justifications for remote work practices.

As a society, we've engaged in a grand experiment about where and how we work. Accelerated by the global pandemic of 2020 and beyond which shuttered office doors and forced everyone to adapt to the available technology for working remotely, the rise in work from home (or other spaces apart from the office) has been an unstoppable force. It makes sense—commuting time, inefficient downtime in the office, and the stresses of trying to juggle external responsibilities led to a strong and almost universal desire to be able to work from home, at least sometimes. According to recent data, 53% of US employees currently work in a hybrid fashion (a number which is slowly but steadily increasing), and most swear they will never go back to full-time, in-office work—only 5% of employees state a willingness to maintain their careers entirely on-site.[1,2]

While flexibility may well be good for everyone, it may offer especially important benefits for the population of employees living with disabilities. Instead of needing to commute and then craft the office environment into a place that is conducive to work, these employees often welcome, and request, the opportunity to work from home, not just as a favor but as an accommodation (even as early as 2014, 76% of employees with disabilities who were allowed the flexibility to work remotely felt it was necessary).[3,4]

To hear from some current voices on the topic, we conducted a brief survey of 100 managers and 100 employees with disabilities, all of whom have a hybrid work arrangement across a variety of industries. Indeed, 93% of managers agreed that their company's hybrid policies work well for them, and employees seemed similarly on board on the whole. As succinctly stated by one employee in our sample, "I like having flexibility." Another respondent, an IT manager with a psychological disability, put it this way:

> I have personally needed accommodations in the workplace, and hybrid work has been a valuable way to manage that. Remote work allows me to set up an environment at home that is more comfortable and suited to my needs, which wouldn't always be possible in the office. For example, having control over lighting, noise levels, and seating arrangements has been a huge help in staying productive.

Pre-pandemic, this accommodation was often rejected as the law stated that accommodations must be "reasonable" in the eyes of the business, and working from home was often deemed impossible. Post-pandemic, that case became harder to make, even as people with disabilities had statistically slower growth rates of employment in remote jobs.[5]

Here's where things get tricky for management. How can it be possible to grant work-from-home arrangements as an accommodation to some employees while requiring others to show up every day, or even to show up more often? Or to provide extra flexibility, an option many people would love, to some and not others? As it is, 45% of the managers in our survey admitted to sometimes bending the official hybrid work policies to meet the needs of their subordinates, understanding full well that they risk losing their best people if they don't.

But changing the rules for all is different than changing the rules for some. In our survey, 59% of managers agreed that there would be concerns over fairness if one employee was granted more flexibility to work from home than others were, even if it was based on a legally documented disability. Passions run deep when it comes to this issue, and managers know it. Instead, employees with disabilities sometimes take matters into their own hands,

with 75% of respondents in our survey stating that they have asked for official changes to their own hybrid work arrangements because the company policy hasn't always worked well for them, and 40% admitting to bending the rules on hybrid work for their own needs without asking for permission.

So what to do? The best answer for both managers and employees alike is to re-focus on the work. Making the case for what allows for work to get done is, and should be, the key dimension to this discussion and the main driver of the decisions.[6] Especially for people with disabilities, this is critically important. Classic work in the field of stereotyping and bias tells us that people with disabilities are systematically thought of in terms of their category and not in terms of their individuality. There's the "fear of otherness" effect, which can drive significant resistance. People with disabilities are also, as a group, considered more warm and likable than competent and effective.[7] However, studies show that on this score, being forewarned is being forearmed. Having job candidates with disabilities specifically trumpet their competence and their hard skills for being effective on the job leads to better outcomes than those who show off their soft-skill, people-effectiveness chops instead.[8]

This is for getting the job. But what about keeping the job and keeping the "accommodation" that everyone was unintentionally granted during most of 2020, to work at home? The principle remains the same: the focus should be on the work-case. But as always, the devil's in the details. The EEOC's language for whether this accommodation is appropriate or not includes the following:

- whether the employer can adequately supervise the remote employee,
- whether there are tools and equipment for the job (or access to documents or information) that cannot be replicated at home, and, most importantly,
- whether the job *requires the employee to have face-to-face interactions and coordination with colleagues, clients, or customers, and those interactions can or cannot be effectively replicated while remote* (emphasis ours).[9]

Some of these things are more concrete than others. Whether you need tools and infrastructure for the job is pretty much a yes-no question. Whether you *need* interaction with your peers is much trickier to assess.

The science on this is utterly mixed, and American companies have a checkered past when it comes to work-from-home policies. Some early adopters showed tremendous boosts in productivity (see the story of Best Buy, circa 2003, and their "Results Only Work Environment" experiment), but when market forces turned against big-box stores, despite quantified gains in both productivity and satisfaction from this process, work-from-

home was an easy scapegoat and was entirely scrapped.[10] Other companies followed suit. But clearly, we're facing a pendulum-swing in the other direction right now.

Trends aside, how do you evaluate the work, and where it should be done? Perhaps one part of the answer lies in the insights of a classic management text from the 1960's, which challenged organizations to categorize work into those tasks that are *additive* or *pooled* (people work on individual parts which combine later), *sequential* (where work is handed off from person to person), *reciprocal* (work flows back and forth between people), or must be *intensively interdependent* (where people must diagnose, problem solve, and collaborate simultaneously)—see diagram below.[11] In other words, the more individual the work, the easier it is to imagine it being accomplished effectively remotely. Though teams are a staple of business culture (and may get more bang for the buck of being co-located), many tasks may not actually need this level of interaction, and analyzing this can inspire better decisions as to what work can most easily happen remotely.

In the end, the dual biases of wanting direct oversight of employees and the (mistaken) notion that work uniformly benefits from more face-to-face interaction may be working against the best interests of many employees, notably including those with disabilities. Companies need to more rigorously identify what does and doesn't work from home from the employer's side and to make the case based on the work outcomes from the employees' side, to give employees of all categories the flexibility and the autonomy to do their jobs well.

Figure 1. Types of Team Interactions

Pooled / Additive	Sequential	Reciprocal	Intensive Interdependent
Each member works entirely independently	Work is handed off from person to person	Work flows back and forth between people	People must diagnose, problem solve, and collaborate simultaneously
A + B + C	A → B → C	A ↔ B ↔ C	A ↗ B ↘ C ↔

Source: adapted from Thompson.[11]

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Endnotes

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