



THE ADECCO GROUP

The inclusion imperative

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Introduction

This is a time of a great uncertainty for people around the world, who fear for their and their loved ones' health and also for their livelihoods. Equally, companies are grappling with having to balance the protection of employment with fiscal obligations to stay viable.

Inclusion and diversity have been buzzwords in management circles for many years. Covid-19 is now testing whether corporate leaders truly act on them. In the short term, are they going the extra mile to support their more vulnerable workers and stakeholders? In the long term, are they taking this unique opportunity to durably embed new workforce practices that can make their workforce more inclusive?

The crisis is unleashing economic, behavioural and structural changes that are forcing many companies to re-think all aspects of their business, from supply chains to distributed work. It is creating a unique chance to embed inclusive workforce practices from top to bottom. Companies that succeed in engaging the full talents and abilities of their workforce will be positioned more strongly for the future: more agile, more creative and more adaptive to change.

“It’s going to become clear now who really understood that in times of stress, the only real path forward is through diversity and inclusion, versus those who have these commitments merely as items in their annual report or as window dressing.”

Laura Liswood, Secretary General of the Council of Women World Leaders

This report explores the opportunities for companies to durably increase diversity as they prepare for the post-COVID world. It is based on expert interviews and analysis of data and case studies, focusing mainly on the Asia-Pacific region. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the various ways in which COVID-19 is having different impacts – direct and indirect – on different groups of people. Chapter 2 looks at some responses from companies that have appreciated the importance of upholding the values of inclusion and diversity in the current time of stress. Chapter 3 looks to the longer term and offers actionable priorities for leaders to take advantage of the current upheaval to build more a more inclusive workforce and more equitable and sustainable organizations.

Carl Frey, Oxford Martin Citi Fellow at the University of Oxford, draws an analogy between the current crisis and the Great Depression of the 1930s: **“Before the depression, companies had instituted welfare capitalism schemes including holidays, benefits and even stakes in the companies and when they were no longer able to afford them, these disappeared. After that, trust in companies’ ability to provide for stakeholders in a broader way deteriorated”**. Companies today, says Frey, have an opportunity to **“walk the talk when it comes to being responsible stakeholders”**.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. All stakeholders share responsibility to **tackle the inequality** COVID-19 has created.
2. Businesses **cannot afford to sacrifice their commitment to inclusion and diversity** in the short term because today’s decisions will shape the future workplace.
3. Companies that rethink their processes, values and culture to make their workforce more inclusive, equitable and diverse **will gain a stronger position: they will become more agile, more creative and more adaptive to change.**

Chapter one: An unequal crisis

Income, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability status are among factors that affect how people are experiencing the economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic. Companies committed to building an inclusive workforce need to understand how these emerging trends might affect the different population groups.

People on lower incomes are more likely to experience a loss of earnings or uncertainty about their financial future. One reason is that many of these jobs cannot be done remotely or are in sectors that face an uncertain future, such as leisure and hospitality. Moreover, they involve close contact with other people, which increases the risk of exposure to the virus.

People on lower incomes are also more likely to be employed on temporary contracts or even work in the informal economy. Therefore, they may be subject to little or no social protection and a greater risk of being laid off. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, informal workers account for over 68% of the informal economy. Having no access to sick leave or unemployment benefits, these informal workers are particularly vulnerable to changes to income and loss of livelihoods.^{1,2}

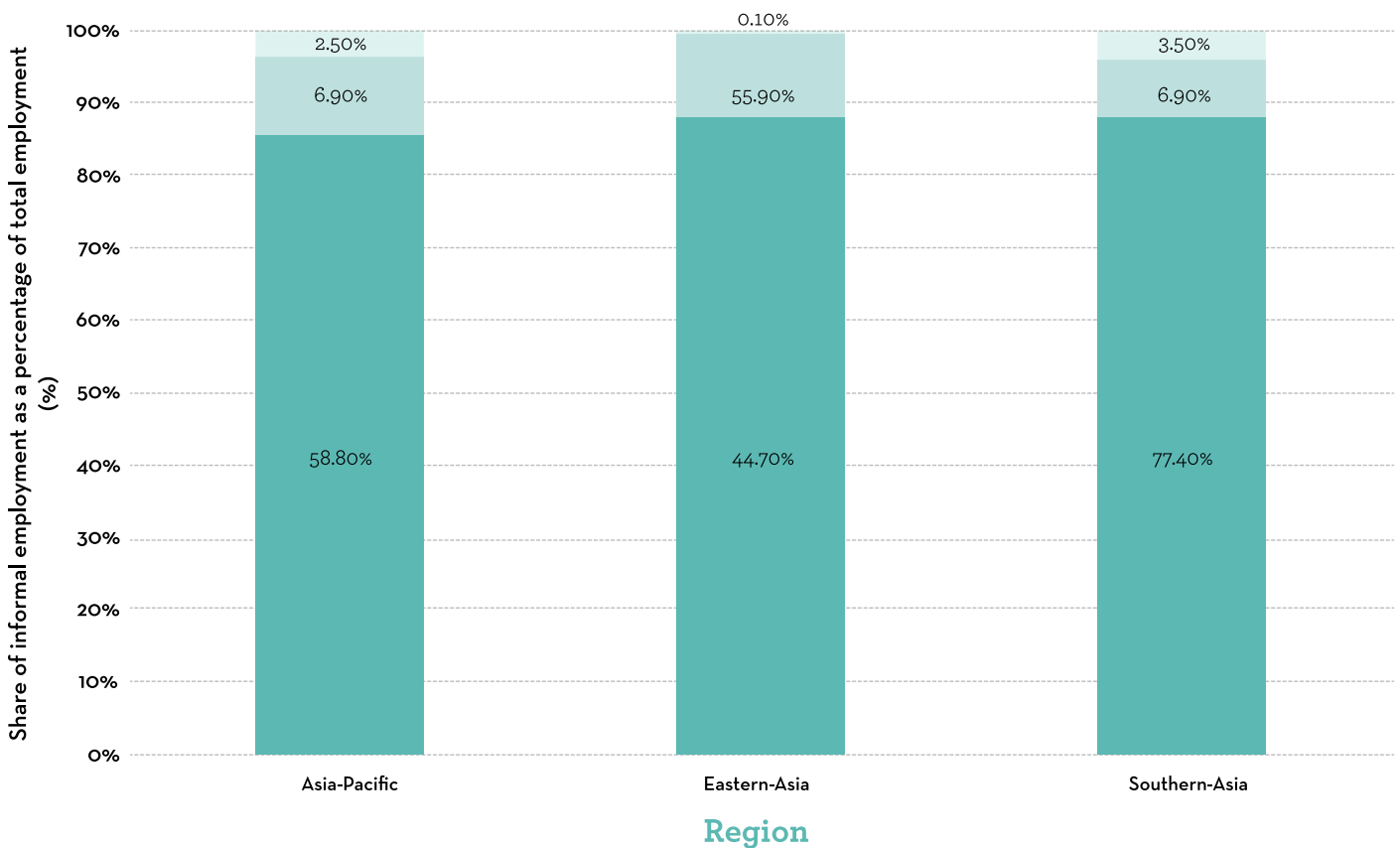


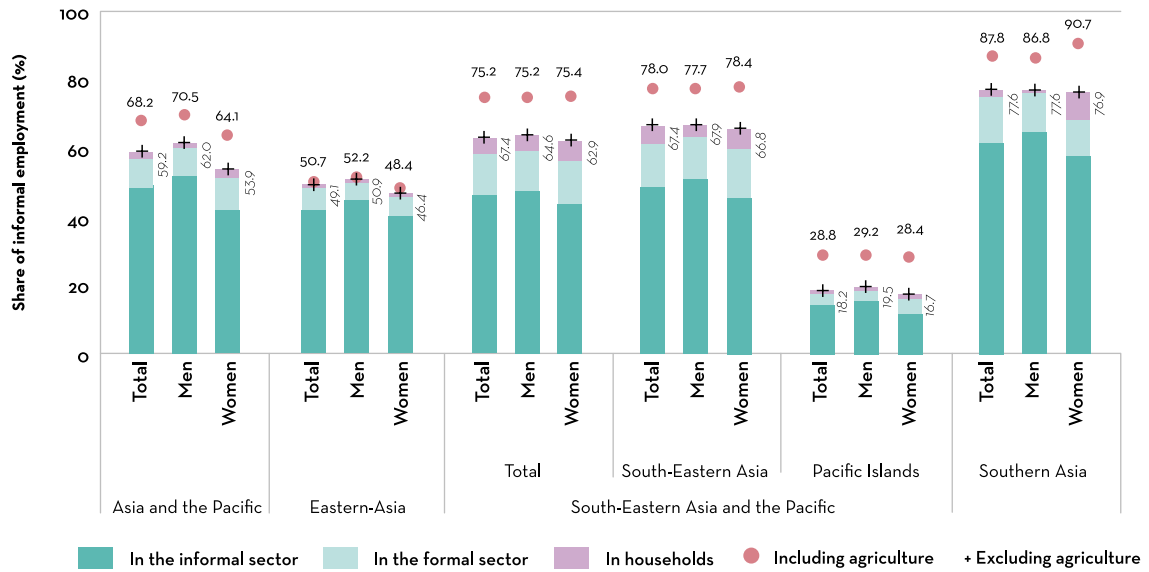
Figure 1: Composition of the informal economy in Asia-Pacific
Source: ILO³

■ In the informal sector ■ In the formal sector ■ In households

¹ https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_627585/lang-en/index.htm

² <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/30/a-new-deal-for-informal-workers-in-asia/>

³ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf



Asia and the Pacific

Region	Without China	Eastern Asia	Without China	South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific	Southern Asia
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1 Age	Without China	Eastern Asia	Without China	South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific	Southern Asia
Youth (15-24)	86.3	70.3	87.0	95.5	
Adults (25+)	67.1	49.5	76.0	89.6	
25-29	70.8	53.8	76.3	90.6	
30-34	67.3	46.2	74.2	89.8	
35-54	63.8	47.0	74.9	88.3	
55-64	72.4	56.8	79.1	90.6	
65+	86.3	72.4	83.9	98.3	
3 Highest level of education					
No education	94.9	89.2	95.0	95.2	
Primary education	89.7	84.8	88.7	92.7	
Secondary education	58.9	52.1	70.3	84.2	
Tertiary education	30.7	12.8	43.5	72.0	

Note: Elementary workers are defined as involving “the performance of simple and routine tasks which may require the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort.” Average 2013-2020.

Source: ILO³

Older workers are more at risk of serious health consequences if they contract the virus. Younger workers are more likely to work in the “gig economy,” where lack of employee protection leaves them with the choice to either lose their livelihood or keep working even if they are uncomfortable with the risks.⁴

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/informal-workers-asia-coronavirus-covid19-employment-deal>

Women more frequently work in jobs that expose them to high risk of catching the virus: globally, women comprise an estimated 70% of frontline health care workers. In Hubei province, China, more than 90% of the healthcare workers on the front line of the crisis were women. In South-East Asia, 79% of nurses are reported to be women and 81% in the Western Pacific. The increase in unpaid care and domestic work for women have also proven to have detrimental impacts towards them and such affected groups.⁵

Across the world, women represent less than 40% of total employment but makeup 57% of those working on a part-time basis, which is more likely to get cut in a crisis. Many women do not have access to safety nets as these frequently depend on formal participation in the labour force. In South Asia, over 80% of women in non-agricultural jobs are in informal employment; in sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 74%; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, 54% of women in non-agricultural jobs participate in informal employment.⁶



⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-outbreak-and-gender-regional-analysis-and-recommendations-asia-and-pacific-may>

⁶ ILOStat

The closure of schools and nurseries put more pressure on women than men. Although both women and men take part in child-care, global estimates from before the pandemic show that around 75% of all unpaid domestic and community labour are conducted by women. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, women are reported to perform more than four times as much unpaid labour as men, including those who are simultaneously committed to paid work.⁷ In Japanese families, wives do seven times more housework than husbands and report to struggle with childcare responsibilities under the COVID-19 school closures.^{8,9}

“The majority of health workers are women and that puts them at highest risk. Most of them are also parents and care givers to family members. They continue to carry the burden of care, which is already disproportionately high in normal times. This puts women under considerable stress.”

UN Women Executive Director,
Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Data also reveals that with more countries undergoing lock-downs, the dangers of domestic violence have become more apparent. Since victims are unable to leave the house or escape to an alternative shelter, many vulnerable groups such as women and children are being put at greater risks to such violence. Individuals who have a strong financial dependence on their partners are exposed to higher risks, as they are unable to leave their partner despite their desire to do so.

When households are placed under strain and in contexts of family violence, as strategies for self-isolation and quarantine are employed, the risk of [domestic] violence tend to increase.⁷

In Singapore, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) women's helpline reported a sharp 33% increase in calls related to domestic violence in February 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.¹⁰

People with mental health issues and/or physical disabilities are being disproportionately hit. Services such as counselling and physiotherapy may be closed,¹¹ isolation may worsen existing mental health conditions,¹² private homes may not provide workspaces adapted to physical disabilities.

While experts have deemed self-quarantine as the best method of preventing the spread of the coronavirus, this is not an option for all disabled people as many of them require assistance from others to conduct daily activities.

For example, many governments have closed down schools and the majority of classes have been moved online. However, students with disabilities may not have easy access to such learning protocols or necessary facilities to support them at home.

General statistics show that the employment rates of people with disabilities tend to be lower than for people without them. In the Asia Pacific region alone, people with disabilities are on average two to six times less likely to be employed. A large proportion of people with disabilities work in the informal sector, exposing them to greater risks of job loss during economic downturns and external shocks such as mass lockdowns. In Asia-Pacific, up to three-quarters of the working-age population with disabilities are employed in the informal sector.^{13,14}

⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-womens-needs-and-leadership-in-covid-19-response>

⁸ <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00546/wives-do-seven-times-as-much-housework-as-husbands-in-japan.html>

⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/japanese-mothers-struggle-to-cope-after-virus-shuts-schools/>

¹⁰ <https://www.eco-business.com/news/covid-19-and-the-increase-in-domestic-violence-in-asia-pacific/>

¹¹ <https://time.com/5826098/coronavirus-people-with-disabilities/>

¹² <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1272383/retrieve>

¹³ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/SDD%20BDIS%20report%20A4%20v14-5-E.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Asia-is-neglecting-disabled-people-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

Chapter two: Putting inclusion and diversity at the heart of the COVID-19 response

While some inclusion challenges can be addressed only by governments or stakeholders together, many companies are embracing their responsibility to support vulnerable people in their workforce through the crisis. Examples of support fall under three main categories: financial support, working practices, and support for mental health and wellbeing.

“We’re trying to pierce the ‘let’s get back to normal’ narrative because normal wasn’t so good for a lot of people.”

Brian Gallagher, CEO of United Way.

Financial support

Most immediately, companies can focus on avoiding layoffs and financially support their most vulnerable staff with hazard pay and catastrophe pay. This is particularly important in countries where social security systems are less able to cushion against income loss. In Australia, for example, over a third of workers are not entitled to sick leave.¹⁵

Several governments have taken measures to provide sickness benefits to workers who are not otherwise entitled to paid sick leave. For example, Japan extended access to cash sickness benefits to people put in quarantine or are diagnosed with the coronavirus, waiving the requirement for obtaining a medical certificate. Some countries have also waived waiting periods. For example, Australia eliminated the waiting period for income support, including sickness allowances. Additionally, many countries have implemented policies to provide isolation packages and allowances to support people during their time away from work due to quarantine.¹⁶

There are also many examples of companies taking measures to help workers find alternative short-term jobs. With demand for its ride-sharing services much reduced during the lockdown, Uber has been connecting its drivers with opportunities in logistics for companies such as Amazon.¹⁷

Many more CEOs have taken voluntary pay cuts than in the 2008 financial crisis – a symbolic gesture that indicates appreciation of the societal value of fairness.¹⁸

“The flexible workforce is expanding, with labour market changes and exponential shifts away from the traditional ways of work. Social safety nets must therefore be extended and enhanced to ensure that the new normal we enter does not leave anyone behind.”

Philippe Martinez, Regional Managing Director for Asia, Adecco General Staffing

¹⁵ <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/all-stories/if-we-want-workers-stay-home-when-sick-we-need-paid-leave-casuals>

¹⁶ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_739587.pdf

¹⁷ <https://technocodex.com/uber-starts-listing-other-jobs-for-its-drivers/>

¹⁸ <https://blog.aboutamazon.com/company-news/amazons-actions-to-help-employees-communities-and-customers-affected-by-covid-19>

Adapting workflows and providing supportive tools

Workflows in most industries are being significantly adapted. When staff cannot work remotely, companies need to equip them with the necessary protective equipment, enforce behavioural rules such as physical distancing, and provide access to medical support such as temperature checks.

"This pandemic has revealed the limitations that exist in our current social contracts. We must collectively leverage and embrace this opportunity to create an inclusive social protection system, creating a lasting change for the betterment of our world of work."

Ian Lee, Regional Head of Asia Pacific,
The Adecco Group

When telework is possible, companies find ways to help workers adjust to teleworking. In many cases, this means that the company must consider the personal circumstances of employees to a greater degree than before.

Take, for example, dual-career couples with young children, who now need to combine parenting responsibilities with working from home.

In Australia for example, 67% of families with children were dual-career couples, of which 1.4 million (81%) had at least one child aged under 15 years.¹⁹

Balancing work with family life has become more difficult during the crisis. Some working parents have the capacity to deal with preschool and school closures by temporarily seeking support from alternative caregivers such as grandparents. However, there are others who do not have access to such extended support systems, making it difficult to juggle their child-care needs and work. This is especially challenging for dual career couples with very young children. Companies have an opportunity to continue showing greater awareness of the need to account for the personal circumstances of their individual staff. In fact, many employers have already implemented flexible work arrangements to cater for such circumstances, ensuring that the children receive adequate learning support at home whilst the parent continues to participate in full-time work. For example, Novartis offers workers' families free access to Coursera and Khan Academy programs. Samsung has allowed employees with children to work four day weeks.

"This pandemic has been a powerful catalyst for business transformation, with companies accelerating the adoption of future work practices and flexible arrangements that have been on the agenda for years. Digital readiness and organizational flexibility is no longer optional."

Ian Lee, Regional Head of Asia Pacific, The Adecco Group.

Many companies have supported workers with disabilities with the logistics of home working. IBM helped workers with disabilities to move equipment such as large monitors and ergonomic chairs to their homes and launched a dedicated Slack channel for them to request additional support.³⁵

Cross-company learning from such occurrences could significantly improve the post-crisis workplace experience of staff with disabilities, who have previously not been properly supported.

Only 40% of human resources managers feel confident in the way their company handles disability accommodations.

¹⁹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6224.0.55.001Main%20Features4June%202019?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6224.0.55.001&issue=June%202019&num=&view=>

²⁰ https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/disability-and-work/WCMS_739022/lang-en/index.htm?shared_from=shr-tls

Mental health and wellbeing

The mental health implications of the pandemic have been profound, from anxiety about health and income to frustration with social isolation.²¹

75% of managers view employees' mental health as the top concern.

Mental health was by far the top concern in a recent finance industry survey.²² An Ipsos MORI poll found that one in five people are worried about mental illness, with women twice as likely to be affected.²³

Even before the pandemic, many companies were increasing their focus on worker wellbeing and satisfaction. Nonetheless, mental health is new ground for many companies: in one survey, 43% of managers in Asia Pacific specified that isolation, mental health and wellbeing are the main concerns when it comes to employees working from home.²⁴ Providing support during the pandemic could leave a lasting impact on companies' ability to engage with this crucial issue.

"We have entered a new reality where remote work is becoming a necessity and a norm. It is crucial that businesses adopt and prioritize people-first policies to accompany such transformations, understanding the potential obstacles employees may confront within the new work arrangements. Give employees the space to navigate optimal ways to conduct their work within their unique circumstances, ensuring that they maintain their physical and mental wellbeing in the process."

Lucy Sharp, Head of Marketing and Communications for Asia Pacific, The Adecco Group.

It is important to actively engage, involve and communicate with your workforce as you consider planning for rebound; using data to drive decisions and actions. The workforce can be engaged through methods such as surveys to help understand practical and wellbeing concerns. The Adecco Group conducts a regular pulse check every few weeks to evaluate employees needs and expectations around working remotely, wellbeing and clarity around health and safety guidance.

Adecco has maintained high levels of employee engagement thanks to digital tools that allow to checking on their needs, wellbeing, and personal development.

Companies can enhance comfort by moving away from 'always-on' communication norms - for example, requiring all calls and meetings to be held between core hours, such as 10 am to 3 pm, and making it clear that employees are not expected to be always reachable outside of these core hours.

Some firms are offering access to therapy and wellness tools to help employees deal with stress and uncertainty. Starbucks is giving baristas and their families up to 20 free therapy sessions a year, and access to self-care apps like Headspace and PwC is making "wellbeing coaches" available. At The Adecco Group, various employee assistance programs such as professional counselling services and career direction support programs are being provided to ensure the mental wellbeing of their employees.^{25,26}

²¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140673620304608>

²² https://blogs.cfainstitute.org/investor/2020/03/27/countering-coronavirus-through-inclusive-culture/#_prclt=rFK9YRoL

²³ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/Covid-19-and-mental-wellbeing>

²⁴ <https://cfotech.asia/story/isolation-and-mental-health-lead-concerns-about-employees-during-covid-19>

²⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/companies-offering-more-mental-health-benefits-amid-coronavirus-2020-4?r=US&IR=T>

²⁶ <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/coronavirus-has-encouraged-companies-to-add-mental-health-benefits-2020-3?r=US&IR=T>

Short-term inclusion: Strategies to protect the vulnerable

<p>Financial support</p>	<p>Help your most vulnerable employees: Identify your most vulnerable employees (including temporary and contract/agency workers) and explore how you can support them financially, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazard pay for vulnerable staff, including catastrophe pay • Commitment to protect salaries, jobs and contract/agency workers as far as possible, for example through flexible hours or shorter work weeks • Extra paid time off for hourly workers and more for most vulnerable groups, such as older associates • Partner with other industries to help staff find other work opportunities
<p>Adapting workflows</p>	<p>Accept that work/home obligations may overlap and support for workers who struggle to juggle both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide access to online resources to help workers with home-schooling • Reduce stress by letting children briefly participate in virtual meetings • Support teleworkers to define their schedules around family duties • Offer flexible working arrangements for workers with care responsibilities, e.g. four day work weeks or additional days of paid care • Logistics support to ensure the right technology, software and equipment for home working for workers with disabilities (e.g. captions in virtual meeting rooms for hearing impaired workers)
<p>Mental health and wellbeing</p>	<p>Put people first and recognize that the crisis can have an impact on your staff's mental wellbeing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage managers to hosts regular check-ins with teams to understand their needs and be sensitive to their physical and mental wellbeing, especially with vulnerable workers. • Ask about workers' personal circumstances to determine appropriate support measures. • Provide access to wellness apps and tools or webinars on how to maintain mental health amidst stress and anxiety. • Avoid 'always on' mentality and 'remote burnout' through clear scheduling and communication protocols. • Cultivate team spirit online to keep the day-to-day routine as normal as possible through virtual happy hours.

Chapter three: An inclusion reboot

Companies that provided tailored support to vulnerable staff and partners during the crisis will have earned their trust and support. As the crisis begins to pass, companies will have an opportunity to deliver on that trust by designing post-Covid workplaces that show they truly view inclusion and diversity as foundational principles.

COVID-19 is prompting businesses to rethink how they operate, as well as to restructure how they approach employee relationships with work, technology and the wider society. A recent Gartner survey shows that 74% of CFOs are planning to move previously on-site employees to remote working arrangements in the post-pandemic world.

This allows employees more flexibility around their work schedules, providing them with the capacity to juggle their external commitments whilst thriving in the workplace.

The crisis has thus presented organizations with an unprecedented opportunity to institutionalize inclusion and diversity into their values, processes and structures.²⁷

“We’re in a situation where the former rules don’t apply structures are being blown up. We now have a blank slate for solving problems, to be more creative and innovative”

says Laura Liswood.

Companies that approach the post-crisis era in an open and forward-looking way can come out on the other side has not just survived, but transformed, says Cristina A. Wilbur at Roche:

“There is a reactive and a creative mindset. A reactive mindset deals with what comes at you. A creative mindset realises the options at your disposal. If we can get mindset right, so many more things are now possible”.

Remote and flexible work: Adapting jobs to the individual

The post-industrial knowledge economy is fundamentally different from the assembly lines of the 20th century, but many companies have so far struggled to shake off the norms of this era – such as workers gathering in the same physical location from 9 am to 5 pm to perform tasks that could now be done from anywhere. This may not change for many workers, such as blue-collar jobs in manufacturing, retail sales jobs, delivery jobs, which make up a significant share of employment around the world. Yet, for many roles, COVID-19 is likely to significantly accelerate the trend towards hybrid workplaces in which remote digital teams co-exist with physical locations. And all workers can benefit from more flexible work arrangements, including those who cannot telework.

Research shows that remote work can increase productivity and worker satisfaction.²⁸ Some digitalnative companies have shown how ‘distributed’ work can give more autonomy to staff. Nonetheless, many established companies were slow to adapt until prompted by COVID-19.

²⁷ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/coronavirus-covid-19-future-of-work-telecommuting-remote-working-12669716>

²⁸ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/working-from-home-productivity-staff-engagement-likely-to-be-hit>

“Most employers saw remote working as an accommodation to a small portion of the workforce, but this is going to become way more common going forward,”

predicts Brian Gallagher.

Digitizing teams requires not only a rollout of software and infrastructure but also changes in processes, management, leadership and corporate culture, which – once made – are likely to prove difficult to reverse. If done in the right way, these changes could profoundly improve workforce diversity, as remote and flexible work structures can benefit disfavoured groups.

Teleworking can, for example, potentially help to address obstacles to women’s economic empowerment identified by the ILO: pressures to conform to traditional gender roles, achieving work-life balance, lack of affordable childcare and lack of transport.²⁹ Women generally have more complex out-of-work schedules than men and can benefit more from homeworking – but surveys show they have also been less likely to be offered this option (see table).³⁰

The COVID-19 working from home experiment can help women because it may change how household and parenting obligations are distributed between men and women. Studies have shown that an increase of 3 weeks in the duration of fathers’ leave can durably shift the split of gender responsibilities in households.³⁰ Companies can encourage this culture change by implementing measures such as non-transferable paternity leave policies that may now be more interesting to men. Such policies are among the best tools to increase women-men equality in the workplace.^{32,33}

Share in %	Women	Men
Working remotely helps me advance my career	62	53
Home is where I am most productive while working	50	37
I do not work remotely because my company does not allow it	40	25
I have quit a job because the company didn't offer flexible work	24	17

Table 1: Remote work for men and women
Source: Zapier³⁴

Many other types of worker stand to benefit from more flexible work, including:

- Individuals with care duties, such as for a sick child, parent or relatives.
- Workers who want to enhance their skills and career opportunities through part-time study.
- Migrants whose visas restrict the amount of paid work they can undertake.
- Introverted and ‘neurodiverse’ workers, who can be overwhelmed by open-plan offices and in-person meetings but are more confident to voice opinion through digital communication tools.³⁵
- Lower-paid workers who face long commutes to avoid the high cost of city real estate.
- Younger workers, who tend to be more digitally savvy.

Companies that take the opportunity to embed inclusivity policies as their processes and best practices for remote, flexible and distributed work evolve in the current context, will be better positioned to hire talented individuals who live outside capital cities – widening economic opportunity and saving money in the process.

²⁹ <https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#persistent-barriers>

³⁰ <https://zapier.com/blog/women-in-remote-work/>

³¹ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3225239

³² <https://zapier.com/blog/women-in-remote-work/>

³³ <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/559/55983/quiet/9780141029191.html>

³⁴ <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/about/company/coronavirus-business-economic-impact>

³⁵ <https://whenwomenwinpodcast.com/episode-1-iris-bohnet-on-why-diversity-training-doesnt-work-process-improvements-and-overcoming-unconscious-biases/>

Bringing evidence and structure to decision-making as well as hiring and performance evaluation

Virtual work can help to address a common inclusion challenge: more confident personalities tend to dominate discussions, with more reserved members of the group finding that their ideas are ignored, and that they are passed over for promotions.

Distributed workforces can lead to managers taking a more structured approach to meetings and decisions. For instance, in a large videoconference, the chair will often mute participants and request suggestions for spoken contributions to be written in chat bars. This can encourage people who are usually drowned out by louder personalities to communicate their ideas.

“Technology creates a much more democratic engagement from people”

Brian Gallagher, CEO of United Way

“Technology creates a much more democratic engagement from people. Face to face, there is a tendency for those in the group who are most confident to take more airtime. The ability for others to electronically raise their hand and engage is fundamentally different when you work remotely than physically.”

according to Brian Gallagher.

“On a conference call you need rules of the road about how to hear people – this implies you will be more conscious about ensuring everyone’s voice is heard,”

agrees Laura Liswood.

“In physical conferences, people are over or under-heard, people interrupt. If you have a regulated way of speaking, you can eliminate those disparities”.

Collaboration software enables companies to elicit input from a far wider range of people than is possible in physical meetings, by using tools such as flash polls, surveys, message boards, sentiment studies and digital town halls.³⁶

Another common inclusion challenge that may be addressed through remote working arrangements is unconscious bias that affects hiring and performance evaluation decisions. There is evidence that removing these unconscious biases by formalizing processes and making them more transparent and accountable can significantly help women, LGBT+ staff and other non-dominant groups advance in the workplace.³⁷

³⁶ <https://hbr.org/2019/10/using-ai-to-eliminate-bias-from-hiring>

³⁷ <https://www.conference-board.org/blog/postdetail.cfm?post=6383>

“Women and under-represented groups have been the victim of poor performance evaluations to date,” says Laura Liswood, due to bias in informal approaches. Digital working often requires implicit processes to be made explicit, which research shows can make hiring and evaluation decisions more fair and lay open and remove unconscious biases,^{38,39} – although algorithm-based tools, when used, must avoid reinforcing existing biases.⁴⁰ For LGBT+ staff, remote work can help mitigate workplace bias and create a space where employees are truly respected, irrespectively of different appearances.

Cognitive diversity and problem-solving

The COVID-19 crisis creates an opportunity to reach out to a broader range of perspectives:

“Crisis leadership requires both command and control and a consensus approach, the latter requires more empathy, better listening skills, making sure everyone feels included and supported, which are qualities which have historically been identified as skillsets that non-dominant groups are more likely to have”.

says Laura Liswood.

Academic research shows that diversity in teams in terms of gender, culture, age and more, result in higher quality decisions and innovative problem solving. A gender balanced and diverse senior leadership board can also provide companies with a significant competitive advantage. In 2019, 28% of senior roles in Asia Pacific were reported to be held by women.^{41,42}

Another study, analysing 1,800 professionals and 40 case studies, found that companies with high levels of both *inherent* diversity (qualities a person is born with, such as gender and ethnicity) and *acquired* diversity (traits gained through life experiences, such as working in different cultures) were 45% more likely to grow their market share and 70% more likely to capture new markets.⁴³

33% of companies with more culturally and ethnically diverse executive teams were more likely to see above-average profitability.

Since the crisis requires high levels of agility and speed in problem-solving, it creates opportunities to spread responsibilities more widely across organisations. If done with an inclusion mindset, this can improve opportunities for overlooked staff who have unique perspectives or valuable character traits such as resilience and creativity. A more ‘federated’ approach to decision-making – giving more autonomy to workers and promoting key individuals to manage issues raised by the crisis – create chances to spread power across the workforce.

Organisations can take this opportunity to create or strengthen Employee Resource Groups, employee-led voluntary groups that represent specific communities of workers.⁴⁴ ERGs have a rich history dating back to Xerox in the 1960s, which launched the National Black Employees Caucus to address workplace discrimination. Other approaches include Diversity and Inclusion Councils, groups of employees including senior leaders who advise on inclusion and diversity efforts, track progress and provide governance and oversight. Such councils could be powerful allies as companies undertake organisational reforms.

³⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-amazon-com-jobs-automation-insight/amazon-scraps-secret-ai-recruiting-tool-that-showed-bias-against-women-idUSKCNiMK08G>

³⁹ <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/how-a-highly-diverse-team-can-help-untangle-complexity/>

⁴⁰ <https://hbr.org/2013/12/how-diversity-can-drive-innovation>

⁴¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karstenstrauss/2018/01/25/more-evidence-that-company-diversity-leads-to-better-profits/#4541b4dd1bc7>

⁴² <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-management/>

⁴³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/camianderson/2020/04/19/why-do-women-make-such-good-leaders-during-covid-19/#2ead1cd42fc>

⁴⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebekahbastian/2019/02/11/how-to-foster-workplace-belonging-through-successful-employee-resource-groups/#e0fab42dc73d>

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for more agile, flexible and responsive solutions. This gives organisations a chance to reflect on their processes and tools and re-imagine how we can operate more efficiently in a post-COVID world, according to Sarah Cheyne.

Last but not least, the current context provides an opportunity to make lasting change on how we develop leaders. Crisis leadership requires a different set of skills and behaviours that may help a new breed of leaders to emerge, who are more empathetic and seek input and listen. One case in point is the observation that countries and cities led by women have fared better during the COVID-19 crisis so far⁴⁵.

Long-term inclusion: Strategies to protect the vulnerable

<p>Remote and flexible work: Adapting jobs to the individual</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain committed to flexible work. Flexible working is becoming the new working norm for the majority of office workers and for some blue collar workers. The practice of allowing flexible work should continue even after the crisis to decrease the gender pay gap and improve LGBT+ company fit and may also increase the representation of people with certain disabilities for which companies struggled to make suitable accommodations. • Support culture change in families. The COVID-19 experience rebalances roles in families. Companies can support this change for example through non-transferable paternity leave. • Continue supporting mental wellbeing of employees.
<p>Bringing evidence and structure to decision-making and hiring and performance evaluation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rethink HR processes (hiring, remuneration, evaluation, development, promotion, termination) based on the experience to ensure that every step is accessible and mindful of different groups. • When formalizing these processes for the new hybrid work environment, include a diverse set of voices.
<p>Cognitive diversity and problem-solving</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure better decision making and stronger leadership. • Develop processes and best practice that allow diverse groups to contribute to decisions in the remote work context. • Take the opportunity to review leadership development practices to ensure that learnings from the COVID-19 crisis, such as the importance of empathy and listening, are taken into account.

⁴⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/camianderson/2020/04/19/why-do-women-make-such-good-leaders-during-covid-19/#2ead1c1d42fc>

Conclusion

In this time of uncertainty, many companies face tough short-term choices to stay afloat. But the decisions they make now will have long-term implications for how our economies work. Companies should bear in mind that inclusion and diversity make them more resilient and creative – and the current disruptions can also create opportunities to advance the inclusion agenda in ways that would rarely be possible during ‘business-as-usual’.

In the short term, companies have opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to inclusion, such as financial help for disadvantaged staff, tailored support for the transition to home working, and proactive support for employees’ mental health.

In the longer term, leaders can rethink every facet of their company’s ways of working: creating more flexibility to accommodate the unique circumstances of each employee; spreading decision-making power across the organisation; adopting a more systematic approach to sourcing feedback and forging decisions; recognising that character traits that emerge during crisis can be as important to organisational success as conventional qualifications; and ensuring accessibility of all processes.

Leaders should act now to put inclusion at the core of their COVID-19 response and grasp this opportunity the crisis has created. This will not only to prepare their companies for higher performance in future, but also contribute to creating a better normal.



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