

# IT'S ABOUT TIME

Learning the lessons  
of Covid in breaking  
down workplace  
disability barriers



# INTRODUCTION

The impact of COVID has been felt far and wide in the UK workplace over the past 24 months. There is a plethora of insights regarding these impacts and what it might look like as a return to 'normal' ensues. However despite the array of studies available, there is a stark lack of reference to the UK's disabled working population of 4.4 million<sup>1</sup> people, the impacts the pandemic has had on this group and what it might mean for the future.

We have chosen to focus on the disabled workforce in the UK to shine a spotlight on the experiences of a significant group making up almost a fifth of the UK's working population.



## ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

To begin to address the imbalance in this discussion, we spoke with a selection of disabled leaders, staff and those working alongside disabled colleagues from a range of sectors, functions and roles in UK organisations. The questions raised invited personal insight and experience, hoping to establish a more qualitative view, rather than conclusive quantitative results. We have woven these thoughts and insights, alongside our own knowledge and views, through the following piece. It is a complex topic and we don't presume to have clear answers, but we do want to prompt more discussion and ask questions which we really believe are important for organisations and leaders to consider.

We are acutely aware of how broad the definition of disability is according to the Equality Act of 2010, and this was acknowledged in almost every conversation we had. However, while we realise that this presents limitations to what we can cover, and even the extent to which our questions could produce crystalised, conclusive answers, it feels even more important to talk about the experiences both collective and individual, good and bad.

We are continuing the conversation to effect change and understand how these experiences could and will impact future working models for people with disabilities in the UK and ultimately the lessons that can be learned to make a positive difference.

Through this piece, we want to present material that is useful and relevant and our hope is that this generates further discussion, as well as prompting reflection, deliberation and response.

We express our sincere thanks to all contributors for sharing their thoughts, experiences and insights so candidly. Any feedback on the themes explored and the insights raised would be warmly welcomed.

# WE MADE IT WORK BECAUSE WE HAD TO

## LET'S NOT GO BACKWARDS

Before March 2020, workplaces in the UK had struggled to implement or encourage successful flexible or agile working models. For too long these models had been considered difficult to monitor, created perceived inequality amongst colleagues and brought more administrative, technological and management challenges than they were deemed worth.

However, for some employees, and particularly those recognised with a disability, the need for flexible or agile working was essential to successfully deliver in their role. For many in this position this inflexibility created a two-tier workforce, bringing varying degrees of exclusion and barriers to promotion, teamwork and overall career or personal development.

The pandemic prohibited so many of us from going to the workplace that an alternative model simply had to be adopted. **Necessity dictated it, technology enabled it and people proved it could work.**

Over the last two years, productivity remained relatively constant<sup>2</sup> and in some cases rose and as we emerge from lockdown, employees recognise more decision-making and choice in their own daily working lives<sup>3</sup>. The momentum behind this transition remains.

**“We need to not let a crisis go to waste.”**

**“Why has this taken so long?”**



There was hope of making flexible or hybrid working the default with the advent of the Employment Bill 2022, which had been in discussion since December 2019. The Bill would introduce the ability for workers to negotiate flexible working from home arrangements with their employer from day one of their contract, as well as the ability to disconnect and work from abroad. However, this Bill was omitted from the Queen's speech<sup>4</sup> in May, despite having been in discussion for over two years, and there is ambiguity as to how this will progress and whether further amendments will be made.

Difference across the disability spectrum, from physical and mental disabilities, neurodiversity, long-term conditions and chronic illness has introduced additional challenges in addressing comprehensively and effectively the needs of a disabled workforce. Individual and collective requirements and adjustments will always need to be a priority, **but complexity and difficulty cannot be substantive enough arguments in today's working environment.** The past two years have shown that challenges can be readily overcome if the will, need and infrastructure are there.

We now have proof that flexible working is possible - and indeed preferable in certain circumstances - and that it can be productive overall.

**So, we ask:**

- **Why has it taken such an extreme event to look at things differently?**
- **What blockers have stopped leaders considering more innovative working models that can enhance diversity and inclusion of disabled employees?**
- **Is there enough pull in your organisation to make change?**

**“COVID exacerbates difference. But we mustn't ignore that.”**



# WE NEED MORE PULL THAN PUSH

For too long, disabled employees have had to push: for recruitment; for promotion; for reasonable adjustments in the workplace; for flexible working and for inclusion more broadly. It has meant that some don't want to acknowledge their disability in the workplace, something that can limit both their own options and those available to disabled colleagues.

The lockdown working experience has varied hugely by sector, role and living space for disabled employees. That is of course in addition to the huge variations of disability and the associated impacts of that for each individual.

For example, the uncertainty about COVID and its impacts for those with compromised immune systems and underlying health conditions has created a deeply problematic divide summarised by a Health Foundation blog<sup>5</sup>: “with many COVID-19 deaths arising from underlying health conditions – intended as a reassurance to the majority – left many disabled people feeling frightened and othered.”

However, **amidst this frightening and uncertain backdrop, there has been a greater emphasis on the individual beyond work.** Colleagues previously known in a working environment transformed overnight into people in their home environments, creating opportunities to more openly discuss challenges and personal experiences than before.

**“Stop seeing disability as a series of programmes. Having a different perspective brings strength to an organisation or a team.”**

Significantly, this opening of dialogues hasn't been without action. There has been a rise in the number of new networks set up or enhanced during the pandemic, facilitated by a desire to communicate using technology, to make things better and to share experiences in a variety of forums. This has included examples specific to disability and inclusion at a senior level, such as the Disabled NHS Directors Network<sup>6</sup> (DNDN) established during the pandemic and facilitated so far online with a membership grown to 49 members (made up of 39 Non-Executive Directors, 5 of whom are Chairs, and 10 Executives including Chief Executives.)

Leaders now have an opportunity to build on this for the better of their organisations and their people. It cannot always be left to representatives of minority groups to campaign for organisational change.

**The very real challenge of staff retention post-pandemic demands innovation from leadership.**

**So, we ask:**

- Are leaders leading by example when it comes to staff wellbeing?
- How can organisations more effectively advocate for disabled colleagues? Is there enough resource, support and attention?
- How can (DE&I) networks (internal and external) be better incorporated into organisational strategy?



# DE&I IS NOT A 'NICE TO HAVE'

The emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) has risen exponentially on the leadership agenda in recent years, but has seen a further uptick during the pandemic. This has happened for a number of reasons including: growing awareness amongst wider society; beneficial impact on staff morale and engagement; more emphasis on personalisation; and a genuine belief amongst leadership that this is the right approach to enhance organisational innovation.

**As businesses return to normal there is the very real risk that DE&I could slip back down the list of priorities.**

This would be a mistake, risking the loss of all the learnings and innovation gained through the pandemic. Moreover, there is an increasing swell of evidence<sup>7</sup> demonstrating that those organisations which have successfully embedded a DE&I programme are significantly more likely to meet or exceed financial targets and be more agile and innovative.

It is vital, however, that disability doesn't become a catch-all label. Disabled people have different experiences and perspectives, bringing variety and diversity of thought. This is vital for business, public service, economy and our society on a much broader level as we look to emerge better and stronger.

**"We need to look at this as potential rather than limitation."**



**A more positive, supported approach to agility and flexibility in working models creates a more inclusive environment** where there is the opportunity to participate without the varying pressures for disabled people, such as commuting, building or geographical limitations, being immuno-suppressed, or anxiety and stress that can accompany a need to always meet face-to-face.

However, it is essential that to facilitate this, IT support is in place and genuinely available. For example, some software applications make engaging in video and other calls challenging for some disabled users. With a committed and supportive IT function this can be alleviated and addressed at organisational level, and it has been demonstrated that this can also help to create awareness of limitations with software manufacturers.

**Leaders must clearly demonstrate at this crucial point in the collective 'return to normal' that organisational environments, culture and people matters are paramount.** This includes a greater emphasis on mental and physical well-being across HR and management, as well as a greater commitment to communication.

**“Technology is much more democratic, but disability can be hidden too easily.”**



The HR function must ensure this approach is central to their organisation to avoid alienating certain minorities or individuals. Throughout the pandemic, modes of communication such as online training, webinars and conferences have delivered much greater levels of engagement and attendance for all groups, but particularly disabled employees. This has served to enhance the inclusion of a whole employee community. Mentoring and coaching opportunities are also now more easily delivered online, greatly improving people development and promotional possibilities for a wider subset of employees.

**We must not shy away from disability because it is too broad and too difficult.** It has been suggested that disability is the last unrecognised minority and this is simply not acceptable. There are excellent organisations such as the Disability Forum working with business to raise awareness, support and deliver better opportunities for disabled employees. There are also very positive internal examples within the public sector where programmes are making an impact, as well as private and public sector collaborations such as the REACH mentoring programme<sup>8</sup>. We need to work together, across industry to make change – from top to bottom – and to make it last.

To adopt a truly inclusive approach, this needs to be felt everywhere – and to make it work we really must see that this filters right across all departments and that leaders are truly leading by example.

**So, we ask:**

- **Is our definition of inclusion really robust enough?**
- **How do leaders ensure access to IT services to prevent exclusion and impairment of experience for disabled employees?**
- **How can leaders make training and development opportunities more accessible?**

**“Our network approach has a maturity to it and more importantly the Executive management team takes it seriously.”**



# WHY CAN WE NOT THINK DIFFERENTLY?

Lockdown has forced organisations and their employees to consider how, where and with whom they work. As we look at this through the lens of disability, we have clearly seen that it is possible to make the working model and environment more equal and therefore more representative of our community at large.

Disability is a very broad spectrum, with the requirements of each individual differing - sometimes hugely. That makes it hard legally to define and categorise, but it also makes it harder from an employment perspective to address.

However, with 14.1 million disabled people in the UK, 4.4 million of whom are in the workplace, it is a very large percentage of the population to not actively address and include comprehensively.

Now is the time to take heed of these lessons: leaders simply cannot ignore this. **If they don't act now to create a more open and inclusive workplace, there will be far greater challenges ahead for their organisations, our economy and society at large.**

**“We have a duty to younger generations of people to be more transparent about our disabilities”**



# BACKGROUND

For over 35 years Saxton Bampfylde has been finding, supporting and guiding existing and future leaders across multiple sectors and industries. Never in that time has anything had such an impact on how we all live and work as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Saxton Bampfylde's mission statement is 'to change the world by changing leaders in interesting and important organisations', and diversity and inclusion has been at the heart of that work from the outset of the firm, in 1986. We worked on the appointment of the first female FTSE100 CEO, and last year 62% of our executive, and 58% of our non-executive appointments came from diverse backgrounds.

Saxton Bampfylde has received industry awards from the Recruitment Industry Disability Initiative (RIDI) and our membership body, the Association of Executive Search and Leadership (AESC) for its REACH programme, created in partnership with the UK Civil Service, which supports people with disabilities to maximise their career potential through a programme of coaching and events.

Saxton Bampfylde also operates the STEP programme, which offers a holistic coaching and career development programme to people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Saxton Bampfylde is proud to be a participant in the 10,000 Black Interns programme, and the OnBoard mentoring scheme for aspiring trustees and non-executives from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds.



## Endnotes:

- 1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2021/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2021>
- 2 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02791>
- 3 <https://www.pwc.com/co/es/publicaciones/assets/millennials-at-work.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1755621/omission-employment-bill-queens-speech-missed-opportunity>
- 5 <https://health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/the-forgotten-crisis-exploring-the-disproportionate-impact-of-the-pandemic>
- 6 [https://twitter.com/nhs\\_dndn](https://twitter.com/nhs_dndn)
- 7 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2021/08/17/why-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-is-the-need-of-the-hour?sh=74bc7c277d87>
- 8 <https://www.saxbam.com/reach/>

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