



Ensuring Inclusion for Everyone

A resource from the State Services
Commission Diversity and Inclusion Team.

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The ability to work from home can be a hallmark mechanism to create and support a diverse workforce. When it's by choice, working from home enables people to balance a range of personal, whānau, and professional commitments, needs or preferences. A flexible approach can help people bring their whole selves to work.

However, there is a difference when working from home is a requirement rather than a choice. In these situations, the notion of the whole-self coming to work is flipped to the whole-self coming to home. It means for many people, those they live with, and may also have the care of, see more of their professional selves than might be usual.

The ability to work from home isn't the same for everyone. Many people may be juggling professional obligations and caring responsibilities. Working from home can create a tension with familial or other cultural obligations that a person may be excused from, or excuse themselves from, when they work outside the home. As an example, for some people being at home with family during the day may bring obligations to participate in cultural or religious practices or gendered role obligations to provide meals or care. It might be that people speak a different language when at home with their family. They might feel uncomfortable or shy having their family or others in the home hearing them speak in English. Some people are isolated at home and by themselves. For others, how their usual workplace is set up to accommodate their needs might not be easily transferable to a working from home environment. They

may be working at tables or chairs that don't offer what is needed. They might be working without access to braille printers. In larger families, finding a space to work that doesn't impact on the family can be challenging.

Examples such as these can impact on how included in the work people feel when working remotely. It's vital that digital connection and connectivity doesn't become the proxy for inclusion. There is excellent information available about leading and managing teams working remotely. This information forms a useful platform for maintaining connections.

However, for some people, working from home can create or amplify a sense of exclusion from the work group. Although the means exist for digital inclusion, we cannot assume that it comes with comfort. Not everybody has the same ability or inclination to speak up about what they need.

For some cultures, putting yourself forward or self-promotion is not seen as appropriate. While New Zealanders talk about the squeaky wheel getting the oil, in Japan, the stake that sticks up gets hammered down.

Approaching our work through an inclusion lens means we all take responsibility for creating a virtual working environment where everybody can succeed. It means not making assumptions that working from home looks the same for everybody. When working with diversity, there are additional considerations that can ensure that inclusion for everyone is not overlooked. This requires us to get to

know each other at a level we might not ordinarily consider.

Building an inclusive culture can require a mindset shift. It means acknowledging and addressing biases. It requires empathy, open-mindedness, cultural understanding and understanding of an individual's personal circumstances.

Asking what people's working from home routine or environment looks like helps build understanding. It can create the potential for people to share what is working well, when the challenging times are and what help they might need from others; remembering that not everybody will naturally feel comfortable to offer this. For leaders, taking an appreciative enquiry approach across the whole team builds a team culture where it's normal and safe to share.

There are many other ways that working from home will look different for people. Each may require adjustments or accommodations made to when or how communication happens. However, applying common principles of non-discrimination, empathy and appreciative inquiry will help leaders and colleagues support each other and ensure inclusion extends beyond digital connections. When we get these things right, we learn so much more about each other, we pull together as a team in emergencies or challenging situations and we can continue to offer our best to the work we do.

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