

6 ways to start building a more inclusive future for your business right now

Whilst many organisations have pledged to better support minority groups, now is the time for verbal commitments to be converted into tangible action. Here are some tips on building the most inclusive business possible – from Paralympian and inclusion expert, Liz Johnson.

The way we work has changed beyond recognition this year, and employers now have a unique opportunity to ensure the best bits of our WFH experiment are carried forward and cemented in new policies. When we return to the office, we cannot return to the bureaucracy, inflexibility, presenteeism and exclusionary biases of old. If employers want to build a more inclusive future for their business, these are the steps they need to take today.

1. Start the conversation

Inclusivity relies on honest and open conversations, and in order to achieve company-wide change, you'll need buy-in from *those* higher up. So open up the dialogue now. Remind board members of the business case for creating a culture where all staff feel equally seen and heard.

We know for a fact that diversity leads to innovation, smarter decision making and more revenue. But this is only the case when all individuals in a business feel genuinely empowered to contribute their insights and perspectives, and are authentically valued and assimilated within teams.

Responsibility for this comes down to line managers and more senior members of staff. So invest in them as well as company stakeholders. Put in place the training sessions managers need to lead inclusive behavior by example, and identify what needs to change to better support individuals.

2. Adapt office spaces

Before staff return to offices, you'll inevitably need to make adaptations to allow for social distancing and new safety measures. So, whilst the builders are in and there's no one around to disturb, now is the perfect time to make spaces more inclusive for everyone. Consider the need for lifts and wheelchair ramps for staff members with mobility issues, as well as the need for gender neutral or accessible toilets.

Smaller scale changes might involve investing in assistive software, such as text-to-speech functionality for those with vision impairments, or giving staff the option of standing desks and ergonomic chairs. Everyone's needs and preferences will be different, so giving staff choice and empowering them to decide what's best for them is key. As we transition out of lockdown and back to offices, open mindedness and a willingness to carry forward the lessons we've learnt will be employers' most valuable asset.

3. Evaluate hiring processes

Inclusivity is all about creating equality of opportunity. So, whilst everyone is still working remotely, take advantage of being able to distance yourself from the business in a more figurative sense. As honestly and objectively as possible, assess whether all candidates approaching your company for a job would stand an equal chance of getting hired.

If not, start by building blind CVs into application forms to remove biases in selection processes. You could also factor in assistive technologies and alternative assessment options, to remove barriers to access for candidates with different needs.

Since we're still such a long way from achieving inclusivity in society at large, the first step is to actively raise up minority groups in whichever spaces we can.

Make diversity a priority when hiring for any new role, work with recruiters specializing in hiring people with disabilities, and hire freelancers to accommodate the needs of those who rely on flexible work. For existing staff, extend opportunities equally by making provisions for the fact that certain groups tend to be excluded from the water cooler conversations that lead to progression and promotion. Make contact with HR now to start ironing out the details of diversity-led development schemes, which can be ready for when staff return.

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4. Update policies

The remote work experiment has rendered stringent 9-5 hours and office-centric policies largely redundant. For many staff with different needs, it's best that these changes are formalized. For individuals with impaired mobility for example, working from home allows them to avoid inaccessible public transport or cramped lifts. Whilst for transgender staff, WFH may remove the trauma surrounding gendered public toilets.

The admin involved in updating contracts and policies can make it a lengthy process. So ask staff now whether flexitime and remote work is something they would benefit from on a more permanent basis, and start setting the admin wheels in motion.

Other policies to consider are whether holiday allowances are equal for all religious festivals; whether different channels of communication show consideration for individuals' preferred pronouns; whether staff are able to work around their caring responsibilities at home; and whether the timings and locations of meetings and social events are compatible with childcare or home-schooling responsibilities.

Not all aspects of our identities are visible, so be thorough and honest when evaluating how company policies can be inclusive of everyone.

5. Seek input from everyone

You can't build an inclusive culture unless the views and needs of all staff inform the process. Since every perspective may not be obvious – invisible disabilities and religious practices, for example – actively seeking the input of all staff is crucial. This is obviously a big undertaking, and you will need to factor in the necessary time to complete a company-wide consultation thoroughly.

An ideal place to start now is by conducting an anonymous online survey. Without the presence of other staff members, individuals may be more willing to identify issues they've encountered. You could also hold open meetings to hear staff feedback on a regular basis. Listen to everyone – even if that means using breakout rooms on Zoom – and be proactive about making change. Update employees on the pain points that have been identified, as well as what you're doing right now, in the near-term and in the long-term to rectify them.

6. Address company culture

Inclusivity means that everyone needs to be on board. So clearly lay out your company values and manifesto, and ask everybody what they care about and what they want to see change. Update these core values and ensure everyone understands what they mean practically and culturally. Then, be proud to promote them. Particularly when we're all working apart, don't be afraid to shout about your mission to ensure staff feel connected to it.

Company culture won't change overnight, but that's not to say you can't start now.

Schedule in remote workshops, online training and team building sessions dedicated to diversity and inclusion, and invite everyone. Professionals can facilitate these sessions to help unlock and work through unconscious bias. The ultimate goal is to cultivate the tools and language staff need in order to engage fully with inclusivity, understand the complex issues surrounding it, and support each other all the way.

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