

Post-lockdown:

Some inclusivity tips

### Introduction

Here are ten tips for making the most of the transition out of lockdown, ensuring you build as inclusive a workplace as possible post-Covid. Forget the idea of “returning”: this is an opportunity to start afresh. Knowing what we do now about the importance of inclusivity for a productive workforce, this is our chance to build it into our working arrangements *by design*. And by doing that, to work smarter.

We’ve put this guidance together based on some of our recent events[[1]](#footnote-1), with additional input from IP Inclusive partners [Focal Point Training](http://www.focalpointtraining.com/) and from our [communities](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/community/).

# 1 Ditch the “one-size-fits-all” approach

You do not need the entire organisation, or even an entire department, to work in exactly the same way. There is room to trust people to work differently and still give of their best: lockdown showed us that.

Chances are, people will be more productive if they’re able to work in the ways that suit them as individuals. New synergies will result. The group as a whole will be more versatile, innovative and adaptable.

# 2 Ditch the “go-with-the-majority” approach

This is not the time to consult using an organisation-wide survey and then select the options that a majority preferred. You can’t afford to have so many people working under sub-optimal conditions; that’s just “one-size-fits-all” by the back door.

Your colleagues are unlikely to be happy about change if they’ve been consulted but feel their input was ignored anyway. You may not be able to please all of the people all of the time, but with a more tailored approach you can get pretty close.

# 3 Don’t make assumptions

Try not to assume, for example, that women will be the ones who want more flexibility for childcare; that parents will want to work from home more or won’t be keen to travel; that online working suits all disabled people; that everyone has a comfortable home office and reliable broadband; that the entire workforce has missed the social side of work; or conversely that introverts have enjoyed lockdown while extroverts will be keen to be back with their colleagues. Avoid assumptions about what “working from home” looks like: for some people, home has been a happy and comfortable base during lockdown, but for others it’s been a very different story.

Different people have different working patterns, social needs and backgrounds. They have different ambitions and anxieties. They suffer different constraints.

Remember: not everyone works, thinks and feels the same way you do. Scary but true.

So…

# 4 Ask the individual (*every* individual)

There’s no easy way round this. A conversation needs to be had with every single person in the organisation. If each line manager speaks for half an hour with each of the people they manage, you’ll reap rewards in the long run.

Do it *now*.

The question to ask is a simple one:

* What would be your ideal working arrangement post-lockdown?

You needn’t guarantee to meet everyone’s requests. That may not be practical. But giving them the opportunity to ask helps build trust, and you may be surprised to realise how much of what they’d like you *can* actually help with.

Some people may prefer to answer the question in writing, others in person. All should be given time to think about it before the discussion, and will need to understand the context and how their response will be used. They’ll need reassurance that their requests won’t count against them, that it’s OK to think broadly and make new suggestions even if they can’t ultimately be accommodated.

Don’t forget to include the managers themselves in this process. However senior, we all have our optimal ways of working. Also important is to support the people doing the asking: brief them well about how to start and scope the conversation and how to handle what it uncovers, in particular when to refer issues elsewhere. And give them as much autonomy as you can in deciding the arrangements for the team they work with.

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| The Personal Return Plan Consider asking everyone to write a Personal Return Plan. It’s a wish-list but it’s also a commitment: *these are the things I think will help me and in return I’ll be able to give my best to the job.* |

We’ve appended some questions that it might be useful to cover in these one-to-ones, to help shape your Personal Return Plans.

# 5 Take care of workplace adjustments

Many disabled people have not had their “reasonable adjustments” reviewed since the start of lockdown. It’s time to put that right.

Again, don’t make assumptions. Ask. Remote working isn’t always more accessible for disabled people. Neurodiverse people may have particular difficulties with virtual or “hybrid” meetings. Home working may not be as comfortable without adapted office equipment. People with caring responsibilities may also need support, especially if the person they care for lives with them. And importantly, circumstances and conditions can change over time, so adjustments need to be reviewed regularly.

Personal Return Plans should look at the support that everybody, including disabled people and carers, needs to help them perform their best. Some adjustments can be more widely useful, for general emotional and physical wellbeing and/or to prevent future problems (for example, comfortable office furniture, better lighting and reliable equipment). If you’re planning to have fewer people in expensive office accommodation from now on, use some of the extra cash to invest in a happier and healthier workforce elsewhere.

# 6 Build and communicate for difference

Don’t be afraid to build teams with complementary, rather than similar, working arrangements. They might be better able to cover for one another and meet client demands, and generally to be more adaptable and resilient. Teams that combine different perspectives often perform better too.

If you can, create smaller teams so that it’s easier for all the members to understand one another’s working arrangements. Ideally, after discussing Personal Return Plans privately between individual team members and their line managers, discuss with the whole group how people’s preferences can be accommodated, so that everyone can work together to make the new, more individually-tailored, model work.

Communication is key, but so too is your organisational culture. Make sure everyone – both colleagues and clients – understands and respects the different team members’ ways of working, especially the boundaries between being available and being off-grid. Use email signatures, autoreplies and shared calendars to publicise and reinforce those boundaries. Also make sure your staff understand that fairness doesn’t mean giving everyone the same thing, but keeping a level playing field by removing barriers that some people face relative to others. These messages need to come from the very top of the organisation.

Consider informal mentoring or “buddy” arrangements for people who’d be uncomfortable raising concerns with their direct colleagues or line manager. Regular checking-in calls can help people feel supported in the new working environment. This will be as important post-lockdown as it was during.

# 7 Allow a transition period

Lockdown came on us suddenly. That was hard. There’s no need to force the same thing on people now. Give them time to adjust and to build their confidence gradually.

Allow people to trial new arrangements for a short period to see if they work (one day a week of commuting to the office, for example). Give them time to get their support mechanisms – childcare or respite care, perhaps – and travel arrangements back into place. Make it clear that nothing’s set in stone; allow them to change their minds and revisit their Personal Return Plan. In fact, encourage everyone to revisit their plan after the first three months, then at least every six months afterwards.

Remember a lot of your colleagues will be tired after everything they’ve been through. Some will be scared, even if just a little bit. Some may be grieving. Some will have had to postpone life events such as moving house or getting married, or professional milestones such as training, qualifications and office moves. Allow a bit of slack in the system for people to catch up with these things. To begin with this may make working patterns a little bumpy, but things will settle down sooner if you’ve been accommodating from the start.

Pretty much everyone will be in need of a holiday – a proper holiday, where they can really switch off from work. Encourage all your staff to take one soon. Plan for that. And if you can afford it, allow them some extra leave this year to make up for their superhuman efforts in 2020.

# 8 Beware the new “hybrid” future

Hybrid events – which some people join face-to-face and others remotely – sound like an ideal way forward, combining the best of the pre- and post-lockdown models. Don’t be fooled. It’s far too easy to create a two-tier system in which the live and virtual participants have very different experiences. Hybrid events need to be carefully planned and skilfully facilitated if they’re to be inclusive.

Encourage good meeting protocols. For instance, require agendas beforehand that make clear who’ll be speaking on what topics and for roughly how long, allowing everyone their chance to contribute. Give participants enough time and background information to prepare. Establish some basic etiquette about the use of chat boxes and how to indicate that you want to speak. Make sure everyone knows the basics about the platform you use for virtual events.

If you can, train relevant staff in the basics about chairing meetings inclusively. Or appoint co-chairs to keep an additional look-out for people who want to speak but haven’t been noticed, or who seem uncomfortable. Politely but firmly call out interruptions, impoliteness and other inappropriate behaviour. And take special care to introduce newcomers and help them feel included.

Be patient over technical issues too. They can happen to us all, but they’ll seem worse if only some of your participants are affected. Ensure that microphones and cameras at the “live” end are adequate for remote attendees to engage with the proceedings as well.

Hybrid working arrangements can bring other challenges, not just to do with events. Team managers will need to take extra care to allocate work and opportunities to the people who are working remotely as well as those who are there in person. It’s another reason to “mix and match” when building teams, to make it easier to share work between different staff and benefit from the full range of approaches and perspectives they can contribute. Set up mentoring and buddying arrangements that cross the virtual divide, to help people develop their professional networks even when they’re not in the office.

Some things worked better on a virtual platform, and some didn’t. This is also something you can ask people about. You don’t need to reinstate all of the things you used to do face-to-face. Whilst it’s great to network over a nice lunch, remember how much time and effort it takes to get there. For many people, a live event is a valuable source of peer support, sector updates and networking opportunities – whereas for others, it’s an anxious and stressful experience. Again, establish who misses what, and the alternatives available to them, before you launch straight in with a monthly firm-wide workshop-fest.

# 9 Mental health matters

We realised during lockdown how important mental wellbeing is to people’s productivity. Keep it on the agenda afterwards. As the initial panic subsides and we settle back into new routines, look out for signs that team members are struggling. Anxiety levels are likely to be high in a time of transition, even among those who wouldn’t normally be affected, so foster a culture where it’s OK to say you’re not feeling 100% and to ask for help. Be ready with an armoury of measures you could put in place to help people cope: perhaps a temporary change in working patterns, a short break, an offer of counselling or at least some signposts to sources of help elsewhere. Actively support your Mental Health First Aiders, who can provide invaluable peer support – if you don’t yet have any, please consider training some.

It’ll be more important than ever, post-lockdown, to avoid “presenteeism”. People have got used to living in the same place that they work and never really downing tools, but that’s not sustainable longer term. Allow staff at all levels to set boundaries between work and personal time, and discourage *everyone* (even senior colleagues) from flouting those boundaries. Encourage people to take regular breaks from the desk. Invest in rebuilding healthy relationships with technology: they’ve become distorted over the last year or so.

There are some great ideas and resources for safeguarding mental health on the [Jonathan’s Voice](https://jonathansvoice.org.uk/), [LawCare](https://www.lawcare.org.uk/) and [IP Inclusive](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/mental-health-and-wellbeing/) websites.

Consider signing up to the [Mindful Business Charter](https://www.mindfulbusinesscharter.com/) to make a very clear statement to your people about your intentions from here. If you really care about staff wellbeing, this is the time to reduce the pressure on them. Lower billing targets. Set a shorter or more flexible working day. Importantly, make sure team managers have some slack in the system in case colleagues need to cover for others while they take time to cope with illness, stress and other setbacks. The thing about expectations is that good people often exceed them. They did in 2020. Try it again.

# 10 Put trust at the heart of it

Lockdown has taught us that even without cosy office environments and corporate canapés, our people can keep the show on the road. We’ve learned that they’re adaptable, resilient, innovative, and above all committed. That they’ve continued to give of their best despite everything going on around them, that they’ve looked out for one another and strived to preserve the businesses they belong to, speaks volumes.

When you decide how to emerge from lockdown, allow those insights to shape everything you do. Most people can be trusted. The more you trust, the better they’ll perform.

## “Steps to Inclusion”

Planning for after lockdown is a great opportunity to look more generally at the inclusivity of your workplace. [Steps to Inclusion](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/steps-to-inclusion-page/) was developed by [Focal Point Training](http://www.focalpointtraining.com/) in collaboration with IP Inclusive, as a tool to help our Charter signatories review and benchmark their D&I credentials and identify opportunities for improvement. It’s a simple, facilitated audit process that’s tailored to take account of the organisation’s size, current practices and future ambitions. It yields practical and business-orientated advice for making the most of the resources you have available for D&I.

Steps to Inclusion can be used as a path towards more inclusive working arrangements post-lockdown. If you’d like to talk to one of the Focal Point experts about it, please email them at [info@focalpointtraining.com](mailto:info@focalpointtraining.com).

### *The disclaimers*

*Whilst we hope you find them useful, please note that the ideas provided here are not intended as legal or HR advice. You should always seek independent professional advice on legal and HR aspects of your equality, diversity and inclusion policies.*

# Appendix: Questions to shape the Personal Return Plan

The main question:

* *What would be your ideal working arrangement post-lockdown?*

Specific things to consider:

* What hours and locations do you prefer?
* What constraints do you have, for instance around travel or availability?
* Can you travel for work, eg for meetings and hearings?
* How are you going to set boundaries between work and home life?
* How will you build the professional and support networks you need?
* Who will you turn to when you need help?
* What support do you need (both physical and professional)?
* What might go wrong with your working or domestic arrangements, and what extra help will you need if it does?
* What do you find hard and what could we help you do better?
* Would a “transition period” help you return after lockdown, and if so what would it look like?
* Do you have any holiday plans that you’d like to work around?
* Are there any life events or family matters that you’ve had to put on hold during lockdown and that you want to pick up again now?
* How do you want to progress in your career from here?

To help people answer these questions, encourage them to think about:

* What types of working arrangement suit you best?
* What types don’t work for you?
* How do you prefer to communicate?
* What makes you anxious?
* What motivates you?
* What (if any) social stuff do you need from your work?
* *What has the lockdown taught you about these things?*

And something to avoid jumping in with:

* “I know what/understand what you’re feeling”
  + Ask open, not leading, questions; let people tell their own stories

1. For example our 12 April 2021 [IP Ability webinar on stress management](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/events/ip-abilitys-stress-management-webinar/), our 13 April 2021 [“RESET” webinar](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/events/time-to-reset/), various [Women in IP](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/community/women-in-ip/) 2020 and 2021 coffee dates, and events on mental wellbeing throughout the Covid-19 lockdowns (see our website [Events page](https://ipinclusive.org.uk/events/)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)