



Employer Guide

Remote Work for People Experiencing Disability



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Inclusion and Supported Employment

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The Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE), Canada's organization for supported employment service providers, has developed this guide to provide employer-specific information about remote work for people who experience a disability. It provides guidance around policy development and some practical advice to consider when employing a person experiencing a disability to work remotely.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made virtual work more accepted and acceptable. The pivot away from traditional workplace structures has encouraged businesses and organizations to adopt new technologies and become, out of necessity, more flexible and adaptable.

This new landscape brings the potential to improve employment opportunities for people experiencing disability—with the right supports and technology in place, and for those able and interested in working in fields that lend themselves to remote work, this new landscape brings the potential to improve employment opportunities for people experiencing disability.

The virus has broken through cultural and technological barriers that prevented remote work in the past, setting in motion a structural shift in where work takes place, at least for some people.
McKinsey & Company (2021, March 17).

Working from home may reduce some barriers to employment faced by people experiencing disability. Embracing this new reality can grant businesses and organizations in certain fields access to an extensive talent pool and valuable new perspectives.

In many cases, virtual work:

- Opens new opportunities for those who can't get to a physical location or for whom transportation is a barrier.
- Facilitates genuine collaboration with modern communications applications. With considerate virtual meeting planning, voices that are often overlooked may be heard.
- Removes the need to maneuver around places that aren't fully accessible.
- Allows employees to use the tools most comfortable for them—providing they have an at-home workstation that meets their preferences and requirements,
- With the proper accommodations and support, can be more productive, comfortable, and safe.
- Enables a more consistent schedule, particularly valuable to individuals receiving at-home support.



Thinking Outside The Box

“Many physical or manual activities, as well as those that require use of fixed equipment, cannot be done remotely. These include providing care, operating machinery, using lab equipment, and processing customer transactions in stores. In contrast, activities such as information gathering and processing, communicating with others, teaching and counseling, and coding data can theoretically be done remotely. Additionally, employers have found during the pandemic that although some tasks can be done remotely in a crisis, they are much more effectively done in person.”

The potential for remote work is determined by tasks and activities, not occupations.

Where telework is an option, it is essential that employers continue to accommodate employees with disabilities and ensure their specific needs are being met.

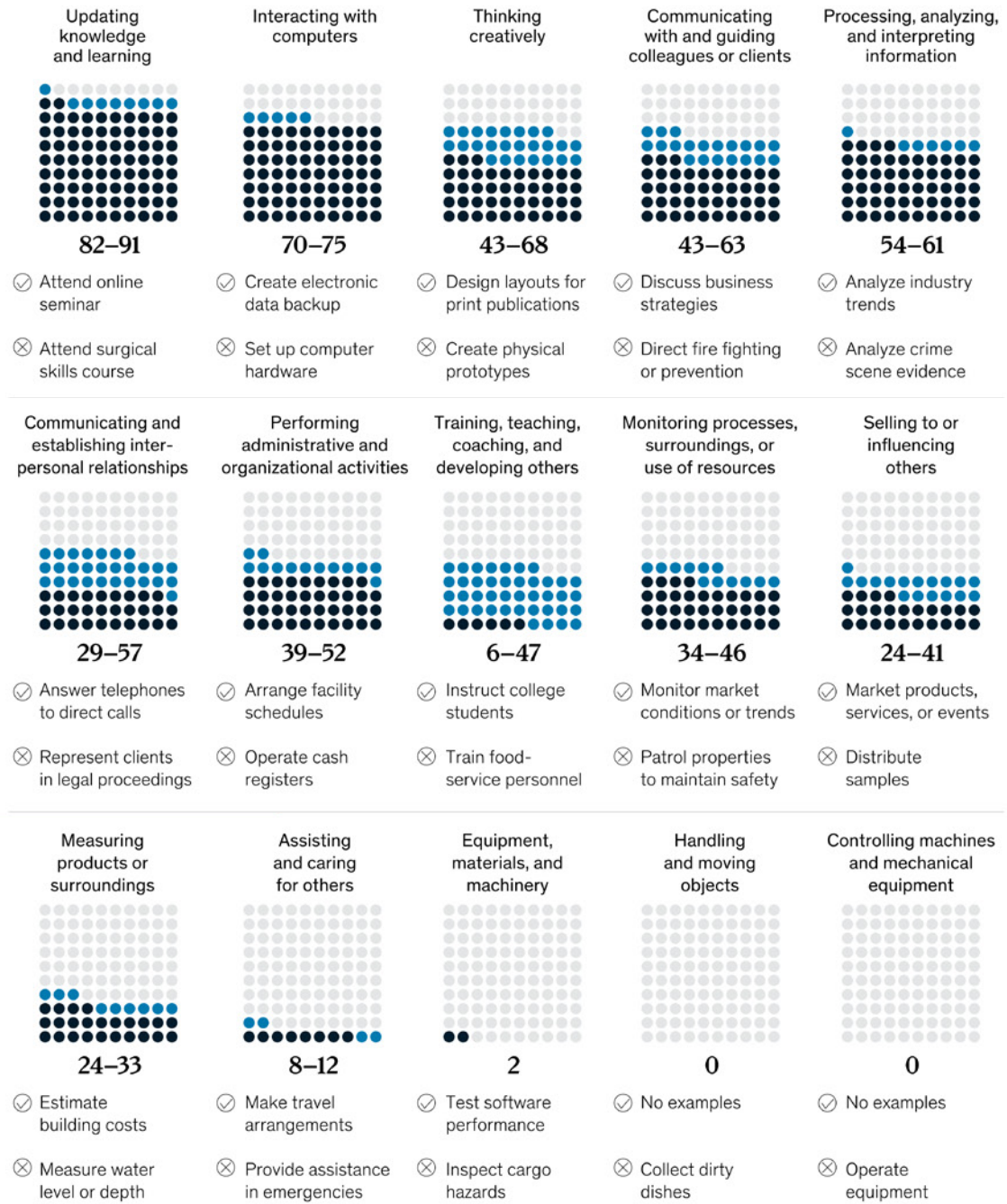
For all its ups and downs, remote work is going to be with us long after COVID restrictions ease. This is the time to make sure it's done right, with the proper accommodations, thoughtfulness, and supports.

We hope the information in this booklet will help.

Activities with the highest potential for remote work include updating knowledge and interacting with computers.

Potential share of time spent working remotely for select activity categories in the United States, %

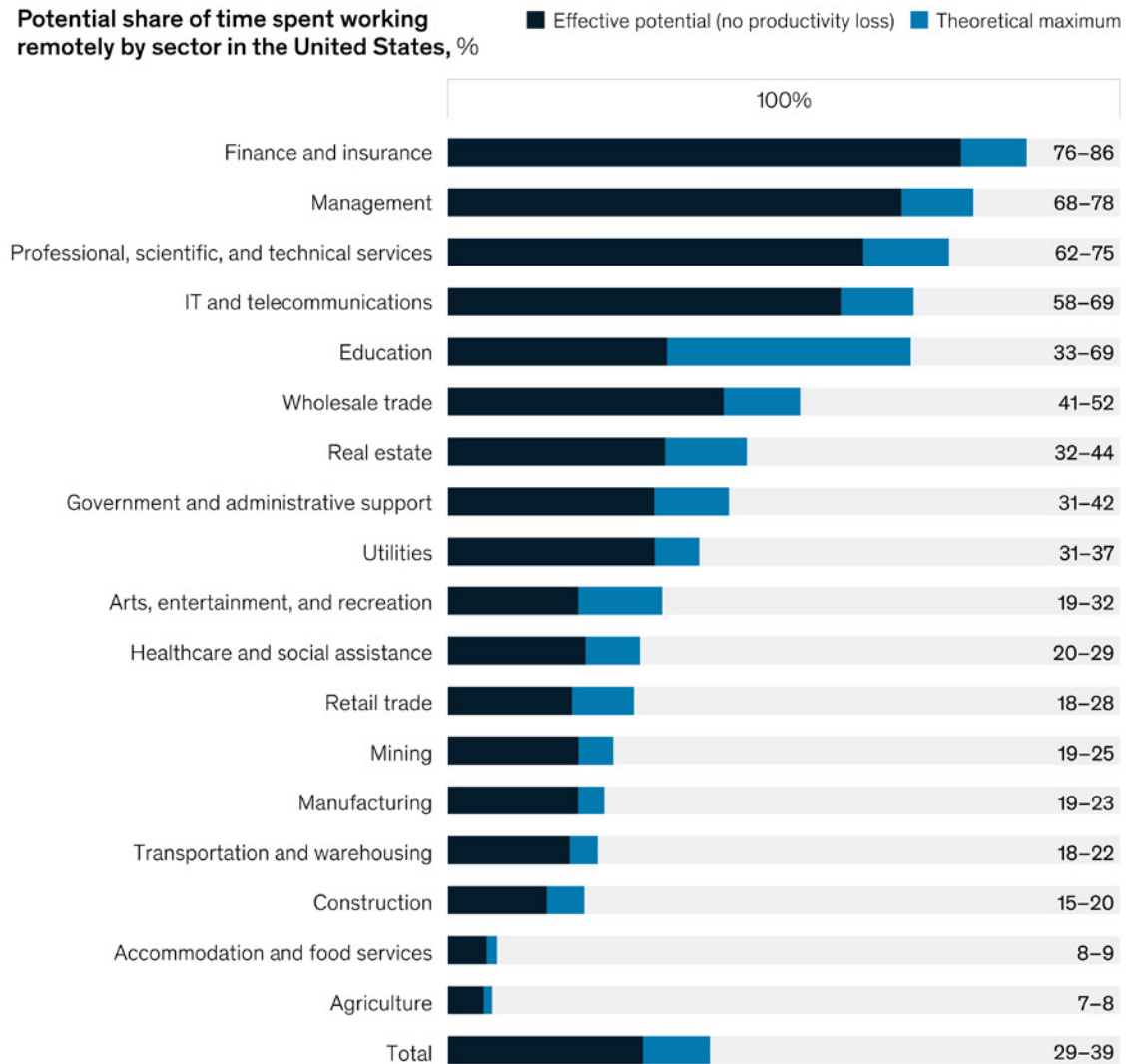
● Effective potential (no productivity loss) ✓ Task that can be done remotely
 ● Theoretical maximum ✗ Task that cannot be done remotely



Note: The theoretical maximum includes all activities not requiring physical presence on-site; the effective potential includes only those activities that can be done remotely without losing effectiveness. Model based on more than 2,000 activities across more than 800 occupations.
 Source: McKinsey Global Institute analysis

The finance, management, professional services, and information sectors have the highest potential for remote work.

Potential share of time spent working remotely by sector in the United States, %



Note: The theoretical maximum includes all activities not requiring physical presence on-site; the effective potential includes only those activities that can be done remotely without losing effectiveness. Model based on more than 2,000 activities across more than 800 occupations.
Source: McKinsey Global Institute analysis

McKinsey
& Company



Reasonable Accommodation Policies

When the essential functions of a job can be performed remotely, a strong work-from-home protocol is valuable to have as a general standard—not just in times of pandemic-related restrictions.

Proactively setting remote work-from-home policies will ready your workplace to meet reasonable accommodation requests from employees experiencing disability, or from any employee facing exceptional circumstances at any time.

A workplace accommodation is any change in the work environment or the terms and conditions of employment that allows a person with limitations in their abilities, or who faces barriers from the standard rules and conditions of work, to perform their job. Accommodation is necessary to ensure that people experiencing disability have equal opportunities, access, and benefits. Canadian human rights law recognizes that employees have the right to accommodation of disabilities in the workplace up to the point of “undue hardship” by the employer.

It’s important for employers to be aware of their responsibilities under provincial and federal accessibility Acts. You may wish to seek legal or expert advice on how to approach remote work as a reasonable accommodation in general.

There is no one-size-fits-all work-from-home policy. In general, an inclusive work from home policy will:

- Ensure business continuity, productivity, and job preservation.
- Be based on applicable national and provincial laws and regulations, collective agreements, and company policy or terms and conditions of employment.
- Include a definition of work-for-home in the context of your business.
- Include specific details relating to company policies (health and safety, data security, code of conduct, etc.).
- Discuss the company’s responsibility in terms of equipment, tools, and supplies.
- Outline performance standards.

COVID-19 has forced businesses that may never have considered adapting to virtual work to do so. Consider this an opportunity to ensure your workplace has a solid remote work plan to the extent possible. It will help you meet reasonable accommodation requests efficiently, no matter when they’re made.



Setting Up an Accessible Work-from-home Environment

Home office setups will be as individual as your employees. Each one will require high-speed, reliable Internet service as its foundation. Other requirements may include voice recognition software, large-screen monitors, noise-cancelling headphones, specialized lighting, screen readers, and modified office furniture.

Consider offering virtual ergonomic assessments to ensure employees have a safe and comfortable work environment. Furniture, lighting, and keyboard/mouse modifications may be required.

Be certain the platforms you use for video conferencing, virtual meetings, and collaboration have the accessibility features your employees need. Consider both your current team as well as potential future hires. Specifically:

- **Closed captioning:** What are the real-time captioning capabilities? If the platform has AI-powered captioning, what is the accuracy rate? Does the platform support live captioning?
- **Keyboard accessibility:** Can keyboard-only users take advantage of all functionality, including chat and screen share?
- **Screen-reader accessibility:** Does the platform work with screen reader technology?
- **Magnification:** Can users magnify on-screen text?
- **Transcripts:** Are transcripts automatically generated after a meeting or presentation?
- **Standards:** Does the platform meet accessibility standards? Was it accessibility tested?

Zoom, GoogleMeet, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Skype, WebEx and Zoom all have accessibility features. Be sure to include accessibility functions in the procurement process when you purchase enterprise software.

Provide training on digital accessibility to all staff. Include information on planning and hosting inclusive virtual meetings—this booklet can help! Familiarize everyone with the accessibility features of your chosen platform; ensure everyone has reliable access.

Also communicate workplace information security policies clearly. Ensure devices are protected and data is managed appropriately.

Be ready for unexpected technical issues. Know who to call if you don't have IT support.

Be aware that accommodation needs might change when switching from on-site to at-home work. Some employees who requested on-site accommodations might not need them at home; others who were not receiving them may now need support. Set up an easy way for employees to request accommodations.

Collect feedback regularly. Needs evolve, and better ways of ensuring productivity emerge with experience and time.

Inclusivity should be an ongoing conversation. Be sure your entire team can have a voice in what applications are being used and how.



Get To Know Assistive Technology

Assistive technology is any device or software application that increases participation, achievement, and independence in the workplace or elsewhere. Here's a quick introduction to some of the most frequently used items you may encounter in a workplace context:

Screen / document magnifiers: Screen magnifying software allows the user magnify text on demand, enabling the user to pan around the screen as desired. With a document reader, the user places paper document under a camera and views a magnified version on the computer screen.

Screen readers: For those not able to comfortably see a screen, screen reading technology provides text-to-speech or Braille output for many applications.

Speech recognition: If keyboard use is a barrier, speech recognition software may be a solution, allowing users to dictate text and commands. You're probably already familiar with similar applications in your mobile or Bluetooth-enabled device—useful when your hands are otherwise occupied.

Ergonomic keyboards and pointing devices: Some users have difficulty with the traditional keyboard and mouse setup (which is not easy on anyone's body). An ergonomic assessment may highlight the need for alternative designs in keyboards or mice (large trackballs; large, protruding buttons)

Live captioning: Zoom and Microsoft Teams, among others, offer live captioning for video meetings. AI-provided captions may not always be extremely accurate; Zoom offers the option for manual or third-party captions as well.

Accessible web and document design: PDFs are popular, but not often compatible with screen readers. Many websites are not easy to translate by a screen reader. Any design work you commission should meet accessibility standards set out by the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative.

For more information on assistive technology, please see the Additional Resources section at the end of this booklet.



Think Deeply About Building an Inclusive Culture

Working from home is a skill: Don't assume that everyone knows how to work from home, or that working from home is just the same work in a different space. This skill is learned. As well as reviewing formal policies with new co-workers, review tips on working from home, such as defining physical space and hours, communication strategies, and unique health and safety factors.

Monitoring and Supervising

Outside of a physical workspace, it's more difficult to manage the two-way street of relationships in terms of both accountability and approachability. Losing the natural flow of a physical office means that employees can miss out on regular mentoring and supervision. While working remotely:

- It's best to take a proactive approach to mentoring, and plan for formal and informal check-ins throughout the day.
- Use a variety of styles, including team meetings, one-on-one meetings, group and private chat, and written reporting.
- As much as "micro-management" has a negative connotation, start with more communication and supervision than you feel is necessary; it's easier to decrease that level of contact than it is to increase it.

Online tasks take stamina

"Zoom fatigue" is real for both the new employee and the manager leading the onboarding—and switching to another online meeting platform doesn't solve that!

- Make sure to space out review of the organization, mission, values and policies over several weeks, leading with practical and time sensitive information such as health and safety information.
- Break down job tasks into components to space them over more time, while building a base for further training.
- Involve the new employee with directing the pace, and be aware that they may not want to admit that they're tired while they're trying to make a good impression—err on the side of shorter sessions.

Relationship-building

During the pandemic it has become very apparent how much we rely on social interactions in the workplace; social interactions that allow co-workers to build trust and an understanding of the nuance within each person's contributions. Without a physical workspace, these interactions need to be much more intentional, especially while building relationships with a new co-worker.

- Set up a "just for fun" category in your online chat platform, and schedule regular online lunches or

“happy hours” to focus on relationship-building.

- Schedule one-on-one sessions between the new employee and each of their team members.

Adapt to flexible hours

Many employees need flexible hours.

- Consider focusing more on goals and benchmarks than “hours worked”. When you’re on-site it’s clear that you’re “working” even when you’re thinking, planning, organizing or building relationships. Encourage employees to engage with and document these processes off-site, even if they look different.

Talk about accessibility and accommodations routinely and explicitly

Managers and leaders need to make accessibility and accommodations considerations clear to everyone on the team.

- Avoid using an individual team member as an example; everyone needs this information whether they have disclosed a need or not.
- State explicitly and give regular reminders that it’s ok to turn cameras off.
- Develop a backup plan to adapt to technical difficulties.
- Check in both as a team and privately to assess energy levels and adapt as needed day-to-day.
- Review your cross-training plans and assign more than one person to work on public-facing, priority, or time-sensitive tasks.



Remote, But Not Isolated

Access to technology and a productive workspace are keys to successful remote work. But it's important not to forget about other elements that might be lost in the move away from a worksite: hands-on mentoring and supervision, relationship and team-building, and informal socialization.

A hybrid model that combines some remote work with work in an office is possible for occupations with high remote work potential

While working from home can be productive, it can also be isolating. Social isolation is already a barrier for many people experiencing disability; remote work may only make this worse. Teamwork can be a struggle. Non-inclusive dynamics among on-site teams may become more entrenched in a virtual environment.

Communication and collaboration is crucial. Businesses must be prepared to ensure their employees' well-being — to check in regularly, encourage collaboration, and to be prepared to intervene as required. Some key tactics to keep in mind:

Acknowledge the difficulties. Communicating only via video/phone/email/text has some shortcomings. Many social and visual cues are missing. Acknowledge that working from home can be challenging and welcome feedback about how to make it better. Talk openly about your accommodations and accessibility policy — someone may need this information, whether they have disclosed a disability or not.

Be flexible. If you invite feedback, be open to acting on it. Consider flexible hours.

Make time for one-on-one. Large group video meetings or conference calls can be overwhelming, exhausting, and, without a good facilitator, can leave some people behind. Connect with each employee individually. The most effective step to battle isolation, according to a survey by the MIT Sloan School of Management, is regular check-ins by managers to see how employees are doing personally and professionally.

Stay in touch, frequently. No one likes a micromanager but it's better to err on the side of too much communication than not enough. Choose short, frequent check-ins over long weekly meetings.

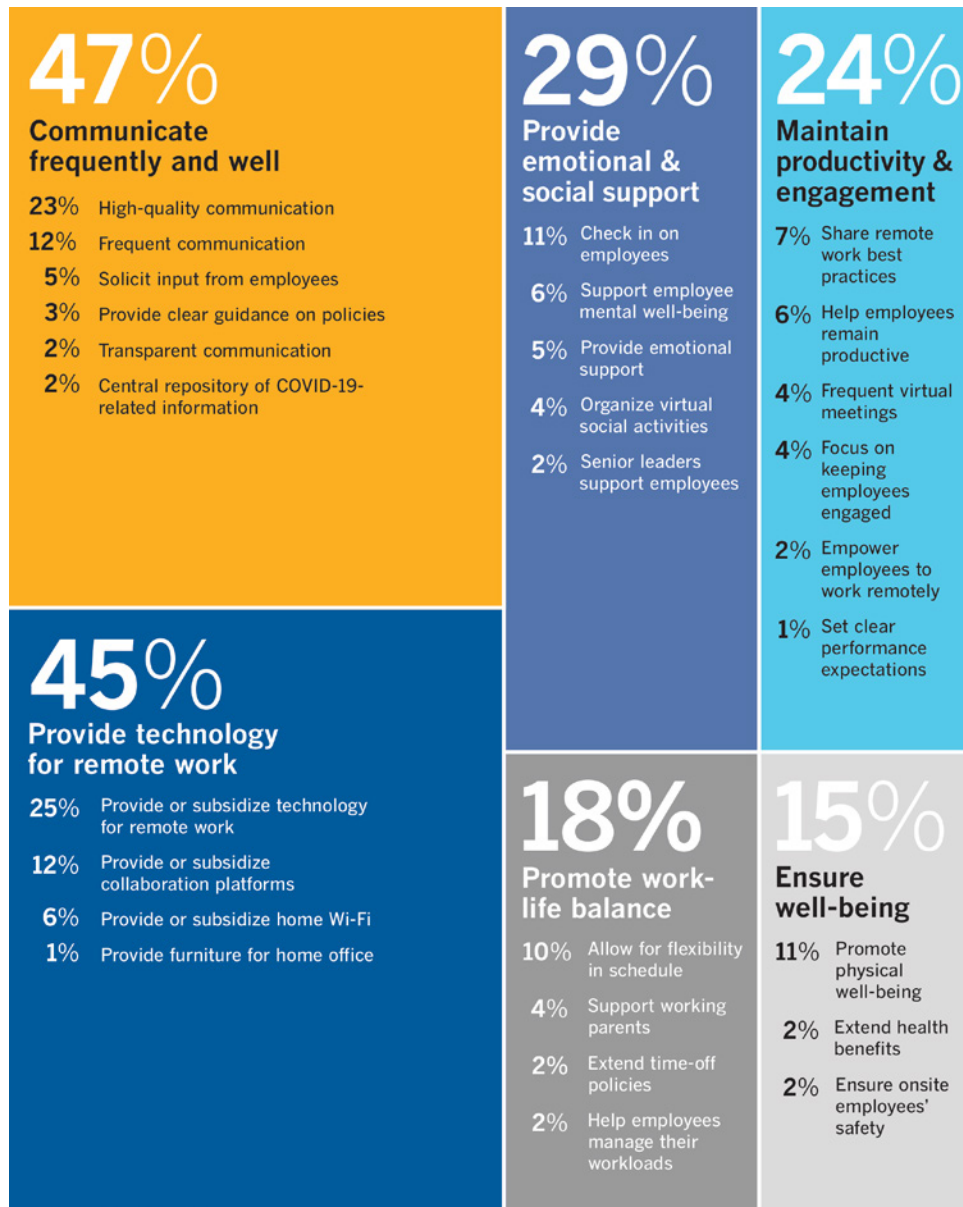
Arrange social meetings, too. A virtual lunch or coffee break is another opportunity for the informal chitchat that usually happens in hallways. Extend personal invitations everyone and encourage participation. But don't pressure anyone to take part.

Make wellness resources available. Share mental health wellness resources. Make virtual counselling services available. Train all managers in how to talk about stress and mental health wellness with their teams.

Respect the home/work balance. Just because an employee is working at home doesn't mean they should always be available. Encourage employees to set schedules and discourage after-hours emails and phone calls.

Create consistent schedules with support staff

Some individuals experiencing disability require supports from care workers for eating, bathing, and/or other hygiene routines. In some cases, this can prevent people from working in an office or elsewhere. Now, entirely new and predictable schedules can be created so that these individuals can apply for jobs they wouldn't have previously—all in a safe and healthy environment. Work with your employee to set a work schedule that works for you both.



Employees were asked to list the most meaningful actions their employers took to help their transition to remote work during the first months of COVID-19. Communication, emotional, and social support are as important as technology.

Source: The COVID-19 Pulse of HR survey was conducted by CultureX, Josh Bersin, and Waggl between April 19 and April 29, 2020.

<https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/five-ways-leaders-can-support-remote-work/>



Accessible Virtual Meetings

Well-run virtual meetings can encourage participation and inclusivity. By laying out the ground rules for engagement, interruptions are minimized, and comments and questions can be taken in sequence—not according to who speaks the loudest.

Videos also help by delivering nonverbal cues, such as when someone unmutes, tries to speak, or raises their hand (their actual hand or an emoji).

Before the meeting:

- Use your meeting invite to ask for accommodation requests
- Check in with all participants to make sure they know how to use the meeting platform
- Send out an agenda; note who will be facilitating and any other roles
- Provide documents that will be reviewed in advance, in accessible formats
- Open meetings at least 20 minutes ahead of time for tech checks
- Set your camera at eye level
- First time using captioning? Do a test run. Note: AI-powered captioning is improving but is not perfect. For important meetings, consider a human transcriber—some platforms, including Zoom, allow this
- Arrange for ASL interpretation if required

During the meeting:

- Make sure your captioning service is turned on
- Record the meeting, with permission
- Check in to make sure all participants are ready, and all tech is working
- Ask participants to speak slowly, and one at a time
- Ask participants to mute their feed when not speaking; sensory overload may impact participation
- Ask speakers to introduce/identify themselves each time they speak
- Avoid jargon and abbreviations. Plain language is more accessible to all
- All participants, if possible, should keep video on and show a clear view of their faces
- If individuals are not comfortable speaking, encourage them to use the chat function
- Read aloud any comments that come through the chat window

- Also read aloud any slides or text materials appearing on screen; caption and verbally describe any images. This is good practice to meet varied accessibility needs, and also solves for technical issues
- For larger groups, assign a moderator to facilitate orderly discussion or Q&A sessions
- Keep track of time. Any virtual work session can be tiring. Schedule breaks more often than you might in an office setting
- Draw out different opinions. A group meeting is an excellent opportunity to highlight and celebrate diversity. Ask every participant for their opinion at least once

After the meeting

- Share the meeting recording and transcript with all participants
- Encourage feedback, and adjust future meetings in light of suggestions



Accessible Communication and Content Sharing

Remote work means virtual collaboration and an increased reliance on collaborative tools beyond video conferencing apps. An accessible messaging platform is critical and allows virtual workers to quickly share updates and progress updates.

Email remains a primary method of communication. Text-only emails are more accessible than those that images or graphics—and that includes in your signature. Keep emails simple.

Many programs, including Microsoft Office, have an accessibility checker. Use it—it can flag common accessibility shortfalls such as missing alt text, poor contrast, and complicated tables.

Content (document, video, and presentation) sharing will also be part of remote work life. Ensure all shared content is accessible and inclusive. Some tips:

- Simplicity matters: avoid jargon, use keywords and short phrases where possible
- Use **bold type** for emphasis, instead of italics or underline, which can make text hard to read
- Sans serif fonts are easier to read
- Never use all caps
- In presentation materials, keep text and visuals large and incorporate plenty of white space
- Be sure text contrasts with the background colour to ensure visibility
- Avoid animations
- Caption all internally shared videos
- Caption and include alt text for graphs, charts, and other images
- Ensure representation in examples, photographs (in-house or stock images)
- Avoid stereotypes—that includes stereotypes in emojis, gifs, and language

Check out [PEAT's digital accessibility basics](#) for more tips on making sure all communication is accessible.



Working Remotely Into The Future

Given the benefits and relative ease of moving to a remote workspace, we can expect to need online onboarding even when the pandemic ends. All of the tips and tools we've used during the pandemic will improve on-site onboarding and the workplace environment. Our ability to adapt and be flexible has been tested during the pandemic and for the most part we've succeeded in the face of challenges we could never have imagined. The best lessons we've learned about online onboarding will influence the ways we relate to and lead teams into the future. We have a unique opportunity to learn from these challenges and intentionally build a culture of remote work that is productive, accessible and positive.



Information Sites

[Barrier-Free Canada's checklist](#) for accessible virtual meetings. Also includes guides to accessible social media, documents, and slide decks.

[Disability:IN](#) offers tips on choosing, purchasing and licencing accessible video conferencing platforms; as well as [best practices for remote work](#).

[Government of Canada: Working Remotely](#)

[McKinsey – Future of Work – What's Next for Remote Work](#)

[Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology \(PEAT\) Digitally Accessibility Basics](#)

[Remote Working, Disability Support and Anxiety: Six Tips To Managing Staff In the COVID Crisis](#) (Forbes)

[Security Tips for Organizations with Remote Workers](#): Government of Canada resource with details on protecting data and devices, and using security tools

[World Wide Web Consortium](#) publishes standards for designing accessible websites.

Accessibility Products, Services and Features

[Apple's accessibility page](#)

[Google: accessibility features and products](#)

[JAWS: Job Access with Speech screen reader](#)

[Microsoft Teams](#)

- [Using Microsoft Teams with a screen reader](#)
- [Use live captions in a Teams meeting](#)

[TextHelp: assistive learning and workplace solutions](#)

[WebEx Meetings accessibility features](#)

Zoom

- [Accessibility best practices for Zoom meetings](#)
- [Zoom's accessibility page](#)
- [Closed captioning and live transcription with Zoom](#)



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