Digital Advances: Making a more Inclusive Workforce?

In a recent article,[1] we explored how our use of technology, during the pandemic, has the potential to create 'digital' divide particularly with vulnerable customers. In this article, we are celebrating some of the ways in which technology can enhance diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Diversity is good for business[2] and diverse teams exist where employers create safe places of work that permit everyone to be accepted as their authentic self. COVID-19 has forced the replacement of traditional models with more innovative and technology driven ways of working. Millions of employees are now operating in a 'virtual business environment' from home. It remains to be seen whether these changes are here to stay, but could they constitute a major milestone on our journey towards parity in the workplace?

The Virtual Office

Many employees in the insurance industry are no longer required to commute to and from office premises. Physical presence at a workplace often comes with long commutes, which studies have shown to cause stress in the long-term, particularly for women.[3] The removal of commuting from the daily routine and the associated reclaimed time can deliver physical and mental health benefits.

Women have historically undertaken three times as much unpaid care work as men.[4] The absence of policies allowing men and women to share parenting, whilst pursuing their career ambitions, plus stigma attaching to men who opt for extended parental leave, has undoubtedly contributed to the lack of women in senior roles.[5] Lockdowns have forced many families to stay at home together and the usual parenting routines have had to be redesigned. A new acceptance that family life and work cannot be exclusively managed, are breaking down some of the barriers to pursuing a career, whilst meeting family care needs. More discussions are taking place and there is now tolerance when family life encroaches on work.

The impromptu appearance of someone's child, pet or partner at a virtual meeting is not a deal breaker after all!

The virtual office is not just breaking down gender barriers. Home working allows employees to choose their own work spaces, operating within an environment that is reflective of their identity. This has the potential to promote productivity and creativity. The absence of rigid office hours also provides all employees with more freedom to structure their working patterns to fit with their own diverse needs whatever they may be.

The Virtual Meeting or Event

Conducting virtual meetings allows a wider audience to be involved. There are no geographical barriers. Global views and ideas can be harnessed. That alone must surely be good for diversity and inclusion?

Making opportunities accessible to more diverse groups, helps to level the playing field in terms of inclusivity and self-esteem. Individuals can participate in events at times

that would not normally work for them, due to travel or other commitments, regional time differences etc. With less emphasis on the need to 'fit in' and more control over how they are heard and seen, everyone can share their ideas without the pressure to conform that is often associated with outside environments. For example, staff and clients who may not be comfortable in certain physical settings can participate in networking events that they would not otherwise attend. Should anyone feel uncomfortable, they can quickly leave with the click of a button.

Having more freedom to wear clothes that are reflective of personality and culture, unrestrained by traditional dress policies and/or uniforms is also a positive development. First impressions matter in business. Great first impressions can shape a career or business deal. Sometimes, those first impressions have little do with an individual's abilities but may be founded in deep rooted personal or systemic prejudices. Where first impressions are formed via digital communications, there may be less scope for conscious or unconscious bias, creating a more level playing field.

Productivity in the Pandemic

Importantly, home working requires managers to place trust in their employees to utilise their unique talents, to get the job done. Individuals who feel trusted, valued and empowered will be more engaged. With engagement, comes success. The absence of rigid and uniform structures means individuals are less constrained by set hours, set locations and the people around them. They can work at their own peak working hours and experience increased commitment to the business.[6]

Diversity of thought and innovation can flourish in a trusting environment.

Technology is key to managing virtual workforces with performance gauged on results, rather than a mix of output and other more subjective measures. Access to data should quell concerns that individuals are slacking and everyone can draw comfort in the knowledge that fact based decisions are being made, with less scope for conscious or unconscious bias, based on individual traits.

Conclusion

In short, our increased reliance on technology during lockdown, has delivered some real positives when it comes to creating more inclusive workforces. Whilst there is clearly no substitute for human contact, digital communication does have a role to play in breaking down the prejudices that come with face-to-face interaction. The pandemic has required a higher degree of acceptance, tolerance and consideration inside and outside of work. It remains to be seen whether most of us continue to work from home or migrate back to an office environment. Either way, we should all take with us the positive lessons of harnessing technology to work more flexibly and inclusively.

Kim Alcock LLM ACII FCILA AInstLM
Head of UK Casualty & TPA Operations

📱 +44 (0)7767 100 623

✉ kim.alcock@mclarens.com

Dive In, the festival for diversity and inclusion in insurance, takes place 22-24 September 2020, get involved with over 90 virtual events from 30 different countries at diveinfestival.com

References

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