

Submission to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation

on

Guidance for Remote Working

5 August 2020

Balance for Better Business is an independent business-led Review Group established by the government in 2018 to improve gender balance in senior leadership in Ireland.

In this context we are making a submission in relation to guidelines for remote working specifically as they pertain to gender balance.

The “Remote Work in Ireland Future Jobs 2019” report identifies many of the benefits of remote working as well as many of the disadvantages:

Potential benefits

- increased participation in the labour force; increased productivity; access to a broader pool of talent; improved ability to retain talent; reduced carbon emissions; flexibility for employees; reduced commuting times; cost effectiveness for employees, including mitigating childcare costs; cost effectiveness for employers, including reductions in office costs; improved employee wellbeing such as higher morale, lower stress levels and lower absenteeism

Potential disadvantages

- reduced employee wellbeing; longer working hours; work intensification; interference with personal life / inability to switch off; greater likelihood of working when sick; increased loneliness, feelings of isolation; physical impacts such as neck, back and shoulder pain from poor workstations; equality issues that may arise from not being able to make all roles within an organisation remote.

However, there are a number of other potential disadvantages which have not been highlighted. As women are more likely than men to avail of remote working options, these issues could have a disproportionately negative impact on females and their career progression. The Covid pandemic has brought into sharp focus the risks to gender balance if employers are not sensitive to the potential unintended consequences of their actions in relation to remote working.

Angela Merkel warns against a “re-traditionalist” of roles as a result of the pandemic, with women restructuring their paid jobs to stay at home. Harvard Business Review research shows that

family-friendly “accommodations”, which include remote working, can derail women’s careers¹. Both men and women believe that flexible working arrangements have a negative impact on career progression, according to research conducted by the 30% Club Ireland².

There are a number of reasons why remote working can undermine career progression:

- Networks play an important role in determining who gets the challenging work assignments, and who gets promoted. Working remotely reduces the opportunities for casual face-to-face contacts and the ability to build informal networks with decision makers. The issue is exacerbated if some people are based in the office while others are working remotely.
- Workers who are office-based are more visible. There is a risk that those working remotely are “out of sight, out of mind”, and the contribution of those who are visible is given disproportionate weight. This could affect decisions on redundancies or career progression prospects.
- For the same reason, remote workers may be excluded from the casual career-enhancing opportunities that those in the office hear about, but which may not be raised at formal meetings.
- Those who are office-based are more likely to be engaged in informal decision-making discussions, leaving those working remotely frustrated at being excluded, and potentially finding their authority undermined.
- Existing biases (unconscious or conscious) and assumptions about gender-normative roles of mothers and fathers may be confirmed by experiences during the Covid restrictions (eg stereotypes that women are less committed to their careers than their male colleagues). If significantly more women than men feel under pressure to avail of remote working options it may prove more challenging to identify, influence and change such biases.
- As more workers return to the office, the majority of participants in many meetings will be office-based. Remote workers joining by video conference are likely to find it harder to have their voices heard in this situation.
- As workers return to the office post-Covid, particularly in the early days when childcare and elder care remains an issue, there is a risk that those who continue to work remotely will be stigmatised if being office-based is seen as a status symbol (“real workers return to the office”).
- If there is unpredictability in the provision of childcare or schooling while the Covid pandemic prevails, remote workers are likely to have to pick up these responsibilities. This will have the effect of reducing work productivity and/or placing an unreasonable personal burden on the remote worker’s wellbeing as they try to manage both work and childcare roles.

We believe that by taking specific actions the negative impacts can be mitigated and suggest that guidelines in the following areas be considered for employers:

1. Raising awareness with leaders and managers of the potential negative consequences for remote workers.
2. Encouraging senior leaders and managers to be role models, by working from home themselves and by managing in an inclusive way.
3. Issuing guidelines on blended/virtual meetings to ensure all voices are heard.

¹ Harvard Business Review: What’s Really Holding Women Back? <https://hbr.org/2020/03/whats-really-holding-women-back>

² 30% Club Ireland: Making the Change Count https://30percentclub.org/assets/uploads/Ireland/PDFs/30Club_FS_Sub_Committee_-_Women_in_FS_Report_2018.pdf

4. Ensuring all career development opportunities, including informal opportunities, are visible and accessible to all qualified employees.
5. Implementing mentoring and coaching for remote workers to ensure they are not disadvantaged relative to office-based employees.
6. Having regular 1-1 calls with remote workers to keep them informed and to provide a forum for issues they may need to raise.
7. Having well-facilitated, open discussions or workshops on the emerging issues, including both office-based and remote working employees.
8. Applying a gender lens to decisions relating to working remotely. Consider whether a policy / procedure may have a disproportionately positive or negative impact on one gender.
9. Gathering the data. What is the breakdown of males and females working remotely, by level?
10. Monitoring promotion data. Are office-based workers disproportionately represented in the number of promotions?
11. Monitoring redundancy and short time data. Are remote workers more negatively impacted?
12. If a Covid-19 surge arises, or for any other reason, and childcare once again becomes an issue, taking caring responsibilities into account in performance appraisals and when evaluating candidates for promotion.

At a policy level, the improved availability of childcare/schooling is vital for the success of remote working, as is the improvement of paid parental, maternity and paternity leave.

We are aware that, with effective management and taking account of the considerations above, flexible working can be a catalyst for creating a more inclusive corporate culture where a greater number of women can advance their careers. Remote working can break down existing barriers to participate in the workforce for women, create an inclusive talent pipeline and provide the flexibility to balance work with family commitments. For those who cannot afford to live in Dublin or who are unable to commute to Dublin, remote working unlocks new job prospects and routes to career progression.

It is important that any remote working guidelines issued by government should highlight the need for a change in approach of managing workforces. Effective remote workforce management will be critical in maintaining company culture, productivity levels, and an inclusive workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. We look forward to future progress and are happy to support in whatever way we can.



Brid Horan & Gary Kennedy

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