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BRIEFING NOTE: DOES WORKING FROM HOME BENEFIT DISABLED PEOPLE?

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Summary

- *Disabled employees are less likely to work from home than non-disabled employees. This is because they are disproportionately excluded from the higher-paying and/or managerial roles in which working from home is more widely available.*
- *Organisations in which working from home is more commonplace do not employ a higher proportion of disabled people.*
- *Working from home is associated with a more positive in-work experience for both disabled and non-disabled employees. However, it does not narrow gaps in in-work experience between disabled and non-disabled employees, and is therefore not disproportionately beneficial for disabled employees.*
- *Even if working from home remains more prevalent following the pandemic, this will not contribute to a reduction in the size of the disability employment gap.*

1. Introduction

It is widely assumed that working from home has positive implications for disabled people's employment prospects.¹ This briefing note summarises new research exploring this matter.² The findings are particularly topical given the possibility of a permanent increase in working from home following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the assumption that this will be particularly beneficial to disabled people.

2. Disability and working from home

Working from home takes several forms such as home-office working, remote working, and telework. It involves employees performing their usual work tasks from home either periodically or permanently, and may require the use of a telephone, computer, and internet connectivity. 35.9% of UK employees conducted some work at home in 2020, up 9.4% from 2019 prior to the COVID pandemic.³ Although levels of working from home may subsequently decline, it has become central to debates regarding the future of work.

¹ <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2020/08/give-disabled-people-right-work-home-covid-19-says-unison/>; <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/nine-10-disabled-workers-want-continue-working-home-after-pandemic-tuc-poll>.

² Hoque, K. & Bacon, N. (2021) Working from home and disabled people's employment outcomes. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12645>.

³ ONS (2021) *Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/homeworkinghoursrewardsandopportunitiesintheuk2011to2020/2021-04-19>

Although the availability and benefits of working from home vary for different employee groups,⁴ there are several reasons to expect it may be particularly beneficial for disabled people:

- i. It might help disabled people by-pass physical access barriers relating to: transport to work (including inaccessible public transport systems); workplace premises (regarding building access and layout); and the uncertain availability of assistive technology in the workplace compared to the home environment.
- ii. Working from home might increase disabled people's control over their working environment regarding comfort/posture, noise, privacy, and lighting requirements, for example. It might also increase control over the scheduling of work tasks, which might help disabled individuals manage fatigue, medical appointments/treatments, personal assistance services, or other aspects of daily life. It might also either assist a staged return-to-work, or represent a more permanent adjustment after periods of absence from work.
- iii. Where disabled people work from home, their disability will be less visible to their employer, thus increasing the likelihood of appraisal, reward and promotion decisions being based on their objective performance rather than stereotypes regarding their capability.
- iv. Working from home may enable disabled individuals to avoid the negative social consequences associated with making requests for adjustments in the workplace.

As such, working from home might be expected to help increase disabled people's employment and close disability gaps in the experience of work (e.g., regarding job control, job-related mental health, work-life balance, and job satisfaction).

However, there are also a number of reasons why working from home might not be particularly beneficial for disabled people:

- i. The anonymity working from home provides might not be to disabled employees' advantage, as it may reduce the likelihood of the specific barriers they experience being addressed, and also reduce the likelihood of managers' negative and unfounded stereotypes concerning disabled people's productivity being challenged.
- ii. Where employees working from home are required to be present on-site periodically, or where working from home is on a hybrid basis, disabled people will face barriers regarding inaccessible transport systems and workplaces on the days they are not working from home. This might particularly be the case should the employer be unwilling to provide adjustments in both the home and the work environment.
- iii. Working from home may present technological barriers for disabled employees if the employer's information and communication technologies are incompatible with the assistive technologies disabled employees use at home; or are otherwise inaccessible (e.g., virtual meeting technology without live captioning and non-screen reader-friendly video conferencing software).

⁴ ONS (2021) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) latest insights: Work*.
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19latestinsights/work#homeworking>

- iv. Disabled people experience greater social isolation than non-disabled people, which may be exacerbated by working from home, given it may limit their participation in mainstream society.
- v. Employers frequently offer working from home opportunities to aid recruitment and retention in higher-level occupational roles. However, reflecting the labour market disadvantage disabled people experience, they are disproportionately excluded from such roles. As such, they may have less access to opportunities to work from home than non-disabled employees.

3. Does working from home help improve the employment of disabled people?

The above arguments suggest it is unclear whether working from home would be expected to help improve employment outcomes for disabled people. Our research, based on nationally representative data from 1,552 workplaces and 14,312 employees within the government-sponsored 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey seeks to shed light on this matter. The main findings are as follows:

- i. Disabled employees are *less* likely to work from home than non-disabled employees, and the prevalence of disabled people in the workforce is no greater in organisations where working from home is more commonplace. 12.8 per cent of disabled people stated that in the last 12 months they had either worked from home or that the option to work from home was available to them, compared with 19.3 per cent of non-disabled people. This is the opposite of what we would expect were working from home to improve disabled people's employment opportunities.
- ii. Disabled employees are concentrated in occupations (non-managerial and low-paid roles) in which working from home is less widely available. This explains why they are less likely to work from home than non-disabled people.
- iii. Working from home is associated with a more positive in-work experience for both disabled and non-disabled employees, specifically in relation to levels of job control, job-related mental health,⁵ job satisfaction and organisational commitment (but not work-life balance).
- iv. Working from home is not *disproportionately* beneficial for disabled employees' experience of work. As such, it does not narrow the gaps between disabled and non-disabled employees regarding job control, job-related mental health, job satisfaction, and work interference with life (though it narrows disability gaps in life interference with work). Therefore, if working from home becomes more widespread, this would not benefit disabled people to a greater extent than non-disabled people.

⁵ The absence of anxiety where your job makes you feel tense, depressed, worried, gloomy, uneasy or miserable.

4. Lessons and the way forward

These findings have several implications for employers and government.

a) Implications for employers

- Employers should increase opportunities to work from home for all employees (both disabled and non-disabled), given its positive association with employee job control, job-related mental health, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment.
- Offering greater working from home opportunities will not help employers increase the prevalence of disabled people in their workforce, given these opportunities would be as attractive to non-disabled as to disabled people.

b) Implications for government

- *Statutory support for working from home.* As working from home is associated with a more positive in-work experience for disabled (and non-disabled) employees, the government should seek to promote it more widely. This might include proceeding with the *Employment Bill 2019-20* to make flexible working the default for all jobs (rather than just consulting on a right to request flexible working from day one of employment), and providing a statutory right for employees to work from home.⁶
- *Increased working from home will not help reduce the disability employment gap,* given it does not disproportionately benefit disabled people. To address the disability employment gap, further action is required including: mandatory disability employment and pay gap reporting; leveraging public procurement in order to increase the employment of disabled people; reforming the government's Disability Confident and Access to Work schemes; and increasing the provision of supported employment services and supported internships,⁷ as outlined, for example, within the recently-launched Disability Employment Charter.⁸

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For further details of our research on disabled people in the labour market and the workplace, see: www.disabilityatwork.co.uk

⁶https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/853886/Queen_s_Speech_December_2019_-_background_briefing_notes.pdf#page=43
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/05/08/right-work-home-could-enshrined-law-coronavirus-lockdown-ends/>

⁷ Hoque, K. and Bacon, N. 2021. Response to the National Disability Strategy. Disability@Work briefing paper. <https://www.disabilityatwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Disability@Work-response-to-the-National-Disability-Strategy.pdf>; CSJ Disability Commission 2021 *Now is the Time*. March. <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CSJJ8819-Disability-Report-190408.pdf>

⁸ www.disabilityemploymentcharter.org