

Remote working for people with disabilities: Simplifying inclusion through digitalisation?

Information on the case study:

Organisation: IW

Size: circa 4,83 million employees

Location: Köln, Germany

Sector: Private economic research institute

Operational context

The Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft (IW) is a private institute for economic research which focuses on economic, social, and educational policies, as well as the labour market. In 2023 the IW conducted a study concerning remote work and how it affected people with disabilities.¹ The overall result that emerges from their research is that the rising of digitalisation opened up many new involvement opportunities for employees, making it easier for people with disabilities to become or remain employed. By companies offering hybrid working arrangements and further developing assistive technologies, people with impairments have been able to improve their professional lives as well as their possibilities to independently integrate into society. To support this theory, the IW study took into account several worldwide research surveys that are elaborated throughout this case study.

The problem/opportunity

Since the changes brought about by the coronavirus pandemic will have a lasting impact on the professional reintegration of people with disabilities, IW deems it essential to increase their digital skills and self-management. Emerging cross-border communication technologies provide individuals with disabilities with more autonomy and flexibility, allowing them to manage medical treatment or rehabilitation exercises while working.² However, a complete shift to remote working could jeopardise social integration within teams as well as the feeling of connection to the company.

¹ C. FLÜTER-HOFFMAN, P. TRAUB, [Menschen mit Behinderungen im Homeoffice – Erleichterung für die Inklusion?](#), 2023.

² J. YORK, J. JOCHMARING, [Dilemmata einer inklusiven Arbeitswelt. Menschen mit Behinderung zwischen Sondersystemen und Gestaltungschancen einer Arbeitswelt 4.0](#), 2022, p.88.

What was done

The IW study takes into account the results from a study by Algoma University in Ontario³, which examined how employees with disabilities can be supported while working from home. This study suggests that all types of data should be processed electronically, and computers should be equipped with appropriate aids (e.g. Braille display, alternative texts, voice recognition program) when needed. During video conferences, sign language interpreters and live subtitling can be useful for many employees. While the Covid19-pandemic accelerated the promotion and investment in digital aids, research on their application for employees with disabilities remains limited. This digital gap is also cemented by the fact that households of people with disabilities generally have fewer access to hardware, software and internet connections.⁴

While reduced commuting can benefit many people with impairments, the IW study finds, new assistive digital aids should not create new barriers but rather facilitate greater participation in the workforce. Empirically proven success factors for a successful home office are above all: information flow, management quality, technical equipment, ergonomics and the quality of the room environment.⁵

A further study taken into account by IW was the one carried out by the German Association for Rehabilitation (Deutsche Vereinigung für Rehabilitation – DVfR)⁶. It defined the optimal frame conditions to promote remote working and inclusion:

- Establishing voluntariness and depict remote working as a choice, not a duty;
- Equipping the workplace to be disability-friendly and barrier-free;
- Investing in training courses to improve the use of digital tools;
- Strengthening the internal communication: keep in touch, offer support, ask for feedback;
- Accommodating the needs of people with visual and hearing impairments and develop tailored home office solutions together with the employees.

These requirements emerged from a follow-up analysis conducted after the pandemic, which the IW team viewed as an opportunity for companies to revolutionise their organisations. Inevitably, during the first lockdown in 2020, many employees had to face challenges like insufficient technical equipment, poorly designed home office ergonomics and an increase in cybercrimes due to inadequate virus software. As a result, both managers and employees were compelled to quickly familiarise themselves with new communication technologies, as well as learn new leadership and cooperation practices.

The final report that this case study will incorporate from the IW paper is the so called AKTIF project (Akademiker_innen mit Behinderung in die Teilhabe- und Inklusionsforschung)⁷. This

³ N. SHAW, S. BOUDREAU, M. ISSAOUI, [Digital Assistive Technologies to support remote working by people with disabilities: A scoping Review](#), Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, 2022.

⁴ S. JOHANSSON ET.AL., [Disability digital divide: the use of the internet, smartphones, computers and tablets among people with disabilities in Sweden](#), 2021, p. 105–120.

⁵ C. FLÜTER-HOFFMAN, P. TRAUB, [Menschen mit Behinderungen im Homeoffice – Erleichterung für die Inklusion?](#), 2023, p. 57.

⁶ M. BOEHLE, [Corona-Konsultationsprozess der Deutschen Vereinigung für Rehabilitation, Ergebnisse Themenfeld 2: Arbeitsleben](#), Heidelberg, 2021.

initiative also concluded that it is essential to ensure team integration when establishing home office workplaces. The AKTIF findings highlighted the significance of flexible working time models and home office solutions. At the same time, it emphasised the need to adapt and create flexibility in the work environment based on individual requirements, allowing personalised working rhythms while maintaining team cohesion.⁸

Outcomes

The IW study drew the conclusion that an inclusive corporate culture, as described by the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT)⁹, strikes a balance between the desire for group belonging and the need for individual distinction.¹⁰ Such a culture fosters a strong sense of belonging and collaboration within the company, department, or team, while also providing space for individuals to showcase their unique strengths and personalities, thereby contributing to overall team success.

References

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- M. SCHRÖTTLE, S. ZAPFEL, [*Akademiker innen mit Behinderung in die Teilhabe- und Inklusionsforschung \(AKTIF\) – Abschlussbericht*](#), Dortmund/Nürnberg, 2019, p. 40.

⁷ Editor's note: Academics with disabilities involved in inclusion research.

⁸ M. SCHRÖTTLE, S. ZAPFEL, [*Akademiker innen mit Behinderung in die Teilhabe- und Inklusionsforschung \(AKTIF\) – Abschlussbericht*](#), Dortmund/Nürnberg, 2019, p. 40.

⁹ Proposed by Marilyn Brewer in 1991, the theory aimed to explain the psychological motivations driving people to identify with groups. After researching social identity theories, social dilemmas and evolutionary biology, Brewer stated that humans have two competing motivations: a need to belong and a need to feel unique or distinct. These two needs work in opposition and can be activated or deactivated depending on the context. From A. MA and D. RAST, [*Optimal Distinctiveness Theory*](#). Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences, 2017, pp.1–8.

¹⁰ C. FLÜTER-HOFFMANN, A. HAMMERMAN, R MONSEF, [*Betriebliche Einflussfaktoren auf die Inklusion von Menschen mit Behinderungen, Eine empirische Analyse auf Basis der BIBB/BAuA-Erwerbstätigenbefragung 2018*](#), IW-Trends, 2021, Nr. 4, p. 6.

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