

# 5 Ways to Make the Workplace More Inclusive

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It seems like so long ago when we all packed up our desks and went home thinking we'd be working remotely for just a few days or weeks at most. Those weeks turned into months, and here we are nearly three years later. What I remember most about those early days was the discomfort many felt about this "new normal" working from a kitchen counter, corner of the bedroom, or for the lucky ones, a home office.

The beauty of that time was that everyone was in the same boat – home. We were all figuring it out, most of us working in more casual clothing, children and pets climbing onto laps, cameras and microphones that sometimes didn't work. We muddled through collectively until it did, in fact, become "the

norm." The bright spot of a workforce that went 100% remote during the pandemic is that it became a great equalizer in many ways. As we see more companies moving to hybrid and returning to in-office work, here's how we can bring inclusive best practices from remote work into our future.

## Inclusive Spaces

When hosting hybrid meetings, inclusivity starts with eliminating multi-tasking, side conversations and for those joining remotely, turning on video cameras and being fully present and engaged. On a Zoom call, everyone takes up the same physical amount of space in a single square box. At Fidelity, we encourage people to include their pronouns in their Zoom name, so we could share our identity and encourage others to do the same.

As we shift to more in-person work, we'll need to be more intentional about the visibility of our pronouns and use them as part of our introductions. When holding a hybrid meeting, introduce yourself by name, title, and pronoun to provide context and introductions to those in the group. Being referred to by the correct pronoun and having your name pronounced correctly is one simple way we can respect and celebrate our unique identities.

Another tool we can use to be more inclusive is closed captioning. It should be enabled consistently and for those joining remotely, encourage the use of emojis to express emotions and body language. Hybrid meetings can create different experiences for those inside and outside of the room. The camera may not pick up everyone, and for those joining virtually, it can be hard to decipher who is speaking. For this reason, encouraging all meeting participants to stay on camera, even in the room, is an important component of successful hybrid collaboration.

Documents should be shared ahead of time to ensure everyone has access to the materials and has time to process the information, particularly for those who have longer processing and

sensory needs. These actions take additional time and may feel like an extra step at first, but just as we moved into remote working, the more we work this way, the sooner it will feel like second nature.

## **Feeling Seen**

Building awareness in the workplace fosters a greater sense of belonging and creates a more positive environment. One small example of how this can work is through the ability to change skin tones in digital tools like Zoom, Yammer, Microsoft Teams, and other digital applications.

Another is the acknowledgement by managers and colleagues of days that matter in the diverse communities that your workforce represents. These days may not necessarily be identified as paid company holidays but are still important and impactful days that connect back to culture and appreciating differences. For example, Yom Kippur, a very holy day celebrated in Jewish communities across the globe, and Diwali, one of the most important Hindu festivals may not be company holidays but can carry personal significance and religious duties. Creating a calendar of days that are considered significant helps when planning meetings.

Feeling seen can also be as simple as finding a place to connect with colleagues about what's most important in your life. Fidelity has employee-led communities where people can celebrate diversity, share experiences, network, and bring to light important conversations. One such group supports working parents and caregivers. This group holds weekly coffee hours on Fridays for parents and caregivers in all different stages, including those struggling with fertility, adoptive parents, stepparents, and those caring for aging loved ones.

## **The Space and Place to Share**

While our affinity groups are a great place for employees to share experiences and stories, another place is on internal social channels. We use an intranet site to highlight employee stories, and we have internal social media communities where employees can engage directly with one another. One Fidelity associate recently shared his experience with autism. He shared personal details about how he navigates the workplace, and in doing so he opened a dialogue that led to hundreds of comments creating support and awareness around the topic of cognitive diversity and unseen differences.

## **Innovation as a Tool for Accessibility**

Technology is a wonderful thing. Not only did it allow the entire world to work remotely during a global pandemic, but it continues to provide new tools and improvements that increases accessibility. Going beyond Zoom, we have focused on ways to use commonly used programs such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Adobe InDesign, to create accessible documents.

Also, we've made it easier for our managers and associates to create accessible documents with step-by-step instructions. Using a Microsoft Teams bot, our employees can learn how to make their Microsoft experience more accessible by simply asking questions. It addresses a range of needs, including hearing, mental health, mobility, neurodiversity, and vision, all within the application. By exploring the latest add-ons and innovations, we can help ensure that everyone has accessibility and the autonomy to work effectively to be successful.

## **Benefits Supporting Diversity**

Employers should continuously and consciously expand employee benefits and design them to meet the needs of a modern, diverse workforce. Emotional well-being support programs can help all employees manage the complexities of work and life. We should consider parental leave and support for not only the birth of a child, but for the many ways children join families including adoption, fostering or surrogacy. Providing support for that beautiful, yet challenging time is critical to ensuring that the individual can return to work feeling encouraged and seen by their employer.

As we move forward, it's important to remember that historically, discussions about building awareness and inclusivity have been about physical or known differences. We're all unique, and our differences may not always be visible. We must be aware of the differences that are unseen.

A successful workplace of the future embraces diversity and prioritizes inclusion as key areas of focus. We can all do the work to ensure that our employees and coworkers feel seen, heard, included, and valued. That means being deliberate about making steady progress and open about our areas of opportunity. Driving sustainable improvements in diversity and inclusion—like any undertaking of significance—requires time, a listening and learning posture, persistence, humility, and an ongoing commitment to change.