



Organizational
Development



Don't Let Hybrid Work Set Back Your DEI Efforts

by Alexandra Samuel and Tara Robertson

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Illustration by Cecilia Castelli

The past year and a half of remote work have yielded mixed results for organizations trying to improve their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Remote work exacerbated many existing inequities; for example, one reason that Covid [disproportionately affected](#) communities of color is because people of color are less likely to be in remote-friendly jobs. But some traditionally marginalized employees felt that conditions improved, such as some [parents](#) who were able to spend more time with their children and some people with [disabilities or chronic health issues](#) who no longer had to navigate workplace accommodations.

As we shift toward a hybrid workplace, both the equity-enhancing and equity-reducing aspects of remote work are likely to be complicated and intensified. On one hand, it's easy to imagine a two-track situation in which some people put in more face-time at the office, thereby garnering advancement opportunities and promotions, while others fall behind. It's also easy to imagine a world in which the benefits of working remotely all or most of the time are a privilege given to some demographics more than others.

So how do you make sure your company keeps moving in the right direction — and doesn't move backward? Because there are so many variables and unknowns, it's crucial for talent leaders to track the way that hybrid work plays out for various groups in their organizations in real time.

Our own work has given us a front-row seat to the way organizations navigate this challenge: Tara has been a diversity, equity and inclusion practitioner for a decade (including three years leading the practice at Mozilla), and Alexandra is the co-author of *Remote, Inc.* and a longtime researcher on the digital workplace. Here are the five questions we recommend asking to ensure you're tracking the right metrics to help you align your DEI goals and hybrid strategy:

1. Who's spending more time at the office and who's spending more time at home?

Many organizations already look at pay, promotions, and attrition to ensure there is equity across different demographics (age, race, gender). But now, remote work may become an intervening variable — if, for example, men spend more time working in the office and thus advance more quickly. From past [research](#) on bias against working mothers who request flexibility, we know that this is more than a hypothetical possibility.

To see if this pattern emerges at your company, start with baseline data that tells you which employees worked remotely (and how much), both before and during the pandemic. Break those numbers down so you know how the demographics of your full- or part-time remote workers compare to your overall workforce, and include caregiving status, so you know whether parents and other caregivers are spending more or less time at the office. (You'll need to survey your employees to find out whether they have caregiving responsibilities, and as with any questions you ask about race, sexuality or other personal identities, you need to make those questions optional — and take care to keep the answers confidential.)

Then track how much time different groups of workers spend in or out of the office as your workplace re-opens, using data from badge swipes or intranet logins. If you spot demographic differences in who's spending time at the office (or trend-lines that suggest that those differences are growing over time), pay very close attention to the third question below.

2. Who gets to choose when to be at the office?

You should be concerned if scheduling flexibility is enjoyed by some demographic groups more than others. We already know that the option to work remotely is not evenly distributed. Pre-Covid, less than 30% of all workers could work from home; only 16% of Latinx workers and 19% of Black workers had remote flexibility, compared to 37% of Asian workers and 30% of white workers. And it's not because workers of color are less interested in working remotely: A recent Future Forum study found that 97% of Black knowledge workers working remotely in the U.S. want a hybrid or full-time remote working model, compared to 79% of their white counterparts.

In many workplaces, this disparity may appear to be role-based: It may make sense to let some employees pick their days in the office on the fly, while others may need to work a consistent and pre-determined schedule. But to make sure these differences aren't playing out along gender, race, or other lines, seek to understand which of your employees gets to choose whether and when to work remotely.

You also need to ask about perceived flexibility as well as what's formally available since employees may pick up on subtle cues that discourage them from working remotely or a manager may surreptitiously permit more off-site work than their organization officially allows.

Do this through anonymous surveys of two to four different teams over the first six to 12 months of hybrid work. Conduct at least three surveys of managers and employees in each team over this period, asking about how much control they have over the amount and structure of their time at the office. Analyze different demographic cuts so you can see if any underrepresented groups experience less or more flexibility to set their own remote-work schedules.

3. How does time in the office shape the path to promotion?

This measurement is critical. The risk in the relationship between hybrid work and DEI comes from the potential for time in (or away from) the office to affect the path to promotion. If people who spend more time on location or with the boss advance faster, then any demographic differences in who's in the office could translate into differences in who is rewarded.

There is some evidence for this being the case: In one study, researchers concluded that remote workers and office workers were promoted at the same rate, but found that remote workers' salaries grew more slowly.

This reflects the bias documented in a 2014 [study](#) of attitudes towards workplace flexibility, in which two experiments revealed negative perceptions of workers who asked to work from home.

But remote work might instead turn out to be a professional *advantage* rather than a disadvantage. In a Maru Public Opinion survey conducted as part of Alexandra's research for her book [Remote, Inc.](#) (co-authored with Robert Pozen), more than half of long-term remote workers reported that they are more productive at home than they were at the office. If working remotely makes employees *more* productive, that can lead to advancement and higher earnings.

To find out whether time spent working remotely makes your employees more or less likely to advance, track every promotion and pay increase for the next 12 to 18 months, and check whether it correlates with time spent in the office. In addition, ask engagement survey questions like “When did your manager last give you an assignment that provided an opportunity for you to build new skills or demonstrate new abilities?” to capture subtler indicators of who is getting fast-tracked.

4. How are remote management tactics used?

Many companies have turned to key logging, enforced logins or constant video meetings as a way to make sure workers are really at their desks. This monitoring may actually [lower](#) productivity (not to mention erode employee trust and engagement). And precisely because we know that both employee [surveillance](#) and [pressure](#) to prove to a manager that an employee is “at work” varies by race and gender, we should be concerned about how these practices affect the productivity and inclusivity of a hybrid workforce.

5. How does time in or out of the office predict employee engagement and retention?

For some employees, time *out* of the office increases professional engagement: Without the interruptions and distractions of the workplace, they're able to dive deep into the work they're passionate about, and feel like they're making a significant contribution. For other employees, time *in* the office is a major driver of job satisfaction, because it gives them structure and collegial connection.

You may have a challenge in creating a level playing field if there are demographic differences in who thrives in or out of the workplace. To gauge this, include a measure of wellbeing, satisfaction, and retention in your employee surveys and compare the results to your demographic data and time in and out of the workplace as well. For example, if employees of color report a greater sense of wellbeing when they spend more time out of the office and safe from microaggressions, you might start to see situations where employees of color sacrifice promotions in favor of personal wellbeing by working remotely.

Once you begin getting data from all of your measurements you will be able to change policies and programs accordingly. If there are systemic differences in how much flexibility workers have to work remotely, for example, you can develop policies that reduce bias in remote work options; if there are systemic differences in how much time different groups of employees choose to spend at the office, you can look at whether you need to adapt your workplace to be more inclusive or change how advancement occurs. But without these measurements in place, you won't be able to ensure that marginalized groups are supported by — and not further disenfranchised by — hybrid work.



Alexandra Samuel is a tech speaker and data journalist who creates data-driven reports and workshops for companies around the world. She is the co-author of *Remote, Inc.: How to Thrive at Work... Wherever You Are* (with Robert C. Pozen) and the author of HBR's *Work Smarter With Social Media*. Follow her on Twitter at [@awsamuel](#).



Tara Robertson partners with leaders eager to make their organizations more diverse, equitable, and inclusive through systemic change. She previously led Diversity and Inclusion at Mozilla and her work has been included in *Forbes* and other publications.