
Benefits and Learning from Remote Working for WAM Graduates with Disabilities

In the Spring 2021 edition of the AHEAD Journal, we highlighted how [The WAM Programme responded to the Covid-19 pandemic](#) and how it changed our way of working in supporting employers in the recruitment of graduates with disabilities in the workplace. We have now been working in this virtual world since March 2020 and we have supported 17 employers in facilitating almost 400 virtual interviews with graduates with disabilities. 83 graduates with disabilities were offered positions with 14 of these employers of which 71 placements commenced, continued and are still continuing on a remote-working basis.

This article will highlight what we have learned in the past 18 months including some feedback from a focus group we conducted with WAM graduates discussing their experiences of working from home during the pandemic. The feedback included several positive and negative effects this style of working had on areas such as effective communication, relationships with managers and mentors, professional development and access to IT support and hardware equipment.

Accessible Jobs for Graduates

We have certainly seen many benefits to remote-working during these 18 months, not just for graduates with disabilities but also for employers. One of the biggest benefits for employers was that they were able to fill roles that perhaps may have been difficult to fill due to the geographical location of the placement or simply because it was not possible for graduates with disabilities to relocate or seek suitable accommodation in the city or town where the placement was located. One such example of this was that four placements were located in one county in the West of Ireland and were being facilitated remotely due to the pandemic and all of the WAM graduates who undertook these placements actually lived in a different county.

Reduced Workplace Accommodations

Another major benefit we found is that remote-working lent itself to needing fewer adjustments or accommodations in the majority of the needs assessment we carried out with graduates. For example, auditing the work environment space and making adjustments was not a major feature as most WAM graduates were in their own house or living in accommodation where the environment was controlled for them. This did not just relate to physical accessibility, but also applied to WAM graduates with sensory or processing conditions which may have required accommodations when working in a large open plan office environment.

In addition to this, the need for Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans was nonexistent and other health and safety considerations were reduced. For example, in cases where a WAM graduate with epilepsy was commencing work on-site, typically an action plan would be put in place including awareness training with the graduate's team on what to do in the event of a seizure. This level of detail was not necessary in a remote-working context; while disclosure and some detail surrounding the events of a seizure was necessary, it was quite minimal.

New ways of communication via technology led to greater inclusion for graduates with disabilities; for example,

Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meets all have an auto-generated captions feature which allows graduates who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing to follow a meeting online perhaps better than if they were at an in-person meeting. However, that's not to say it was all plain sailing! There were IT issues, mainly in relation to the provision of assistive technology and the complex nature of trying to get an 'off-the shelf' product to work with custom programmes within a high-level security server.

Learning from WAM Graduates

In August 2021, AHEAD conducted a focus group with a small number of graduates who completed WAM Placements during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of graduates were on a 6-month contract, with one graduate on a 12-month contract. All graduates commenced and completed their placement entirely on a remote-working basis.

Communication

Many of the graduates praised the efforts that their employers made to support them in working from home with one graduate saying **'it was difficult, but there was a lot of support, there was a good support structure'**. Graduates described their employers and colleagues as supportive, approachable and accessible when needed and noted that their colleagues were helpful in responding to their queries or concerns. One graduate commented that they **'fitted right into the team'** and that their colleagues **'bent over backwards'** to help them.

That being said, all the graduates noted that working from home made interacting with their colleagues more challenging at times. Some graduates also expressed concerns over feeling they were asking **'too many questions'**, particularly at the beginning of their placement. One graduate explained it **'was difficult when you had a problem'** because **'you couldn't just keep calling people'**.

All the graduates agreed that asking questions and informal discussions around work would be easier when working in person in the office environment. However, participants commented on the success of using apps such as, MS Teams, Skype, Bubble and other instant messaging platforms to ask questions informally, versus using emails which they described as being more formal. Many employers also organised online coffee mornings for staff, which the graduates also found useful and beneficial for informal conversation with colleagues.

On this subject, many of the graduates described missing the social aspect of being in the office. One graduate noted **'you can't beat just the physical experience of seeing people, even if you're not working directly with them'**. This participant also expressed sadness at not being able to meet or get to know the people they worked with on their WAM placement. Other graduates also noted missing opportunities for small talk, incidental learning and picking up quick tips from colleagues, when working from home.

Relationships and Professional Growth

The importance of the good relationship between WAM graduates and their manager and mentor was evident from this focus group discussion. As described above most of the graduates described their managers and mentors as helpful and supportive.

One significantly positive point highlighted in the focus group was that many of the graduates felt the amount of

mentoring they needed could be reduced over time. One graduate noted '**I was able to get some independence in the workplace and do things for myself so I was very happy with that**'. The graduates described how their mentoring relationships successfully evolved into a co-worker relationship even when working from home.

On the other side of the coin, some graduates described feeling less independent and more dependent on their manager to assign them work tasks. In this way, some graduates felt working from home may have limited their professional growth. Similarly, several focus group participants felt that they would have had more opportunities to demonstrate their skills and talents when working in the office. For example, they highlighted the value of being able to interact with people in person, informally asking people questions and showing them that you're willing and able to do more work.

On a somewhat related issue, some of the participants noted feeling a need to 'prove themselves' while working from home. Some graduates described feeling self-conscious of what their employers thought of them while working from home. Significantly some participants explained they would work extra hours when working from home to alleviate concerns about what their colleagues would think of them and to prove that they were working.

IT and Hardware Issues

All graduates in the focus group described experiencing IT issues when working from home, particularly at the beginning of their WAM placements. One graduate described feeling nervous and stressed as a result of the IT and hardware issues they experienced while working from home, which is notable as this graduate relied on assistive technology to aid them in completing their work. This graduate felt the IT and hardware accommodations they received were not satisfactory, but also acknowledged that their employer did their best in view of exceptional circumstances of the pandemic.

In contrast, another graduate found the IT support and hardware equipment they received while working from home to be extremely beneficial. Nonetheless, many of the graduates felt that many of the IT and hardware issues they had would have been easier to resolve onsite in the workplace. However, one significant point highlighted by one of the focus group participants was that working from home in a non-pandemic context would be more beneficial as it would still allow you access to the office to resolve any issues you may have, while also having the benefits of working from home.

Conclusion

There has been a lot of learning for us in AHEAD, for graduates and employers over the last 18 months, with many benefits for accessing jobs and greater accessibility and inclusion coming to light as a result of 'forced' remote-working. We have seen how employers have reaped the benefit of securing talent across Ireland and it certainly highlights the case for remote-working to be considered as a reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. AHEAD made a submission to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in 2020 and as part of the Equality Acts Review advocating that remote working for people with disabilities should be considered as a reasonable accommodation.

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Lauren McCauley holds a first-class-honours BSc in Health and Society from Dublin City University. During the final year of her degree, Lauren completed a dissertation and health action project highlighting the issues faced by those living with invisible disabilities. As well as this, Lauren was an active member of the first AHEAD/ USI Students with Disabilities Advisory Group. Over the number of years Lauren has also been heavily involved in advocacy and fundraising for MS Ireland.

After university Lauren worked in the area of health research and published a number of journal articles in the areas of missed nursing care and infection prevention and control. At present, Lauren is currently employed in AHEAD as a WAM Project Officer.

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Caroline oversees AHEAD's projects relating to the transition to employment for students and graduates with disabilities, namely GetAHEAD and The WAM Programme which is a work placement programme. Caroline holds qualifications in Deaf Studies, Irish Sign Language Teaching and Equality Studies. Caroline has over 15 years experience of working and volunteering within the disability sector and various organisations within the Deaf community.

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