MEDIA > WORKERS > REMOTE WORK

## Will remote working boost corporate diversity - or undermine it? Dec 14, 2022 ② 5 mins





common as companies and employees adapted quickly to the constraints of repeated lockdowns. The number of Americans primarily working from home more than tripled between 2019 and 2021, according to the Census Bureau. Now that things are getting back to normal, some firms, such as Twitter and Goldman Sachs, have made it clear that they want employees back in the office, but many others appear happy to have a fully remote or hybrid workforce. Americans are embracing flexible work - and they want more of it, according to a report from McKinsey, a global management consulting company. As the trend gathers pace, offering

The pandemic changed the way we live and work dramatically in

many ways. Almost overnight, full-time teleworking became

teleworking has been hailed by some as a way that companies can boost their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Dannie Lynn Fountain, a human resources staffer at Google, DEI expert, and author of Ending Checkbox Diversity, says, "Offering remote work creates access to a broader and more diverse talent pipeline and empowers many people with disabilities and caregiver responsibilities to have access to 'knowledge worker' jobs." DEI initiatives have come into focus in recent years. In a recent study conducted by Indeed and Glassdoor, more than 70% of workers aged between 18 and 34 years said that "they would consider turning down a job if they did not think that their

manager or potential manager supported DEI initiatives." The

emphasis on DEI reflects company responses to an increase in

social justice activism following the murder of George Floyd and the **Great Resignation**, according to Ronke Oke, a DEI strategist with the consultancy Ellavate Solutions. "[Such movements] created the perfect storm that led us to rethink and reconceptualize how we work and what the future of work looks like," she says. A preference for remote work options Women and workers of color tend to prefer hybrid employment arrangements, according to a survey from November 2021. In the United States, 86% of Hispanic/Latinx knowledge workers and 81% of Asian/Asian American and Black Knowledge workers said they would prefer a hybrid or fully remote work arrangement,

#### men, and 50% of working moms said they wanted to work from home most or all of the time, compared to 43% of working dads.

compared to 75% of white knowledge workers, according to the

Future Forum Pulse report conducted for Slack. Globally, 52% of

women wanted to work mostly remotely, compared to 46% of

There are many reasons for women, minorities, and other historically excluded groups to prefer to work from home, including caregiving responsibilities and a desire to avoid potential microaggressions that can make in-person work more stressful or uncomfortable and less productive. "A lot of workplace biases play out in face-to-face interactions," says Rachel Korn, research director at the Center for WorkLife Law, a research and advocacy group at the University of California Hastings Law. "When everyone switched to remote work in 2020, a lot of these experiences completely stopped for some people. By not going to the office, they're able to avoid some of these

biases, or the daily microaggressions, and they can have a more

Such arrangements can work for employers as well, especially

Fountain says, "We compressed more than a decade of remote

work innovation into less than a year, and we now have access to

a number of tools enabling us to do our best work at home more

when they prioritize them as they did during the pandemic.

positive working experience."

easily than ever before."

Oke says she has seen an increase in employers requesting assistance in creating remote **DEI programs** and workshops that their employees can access at any time or remotely. Challenges of remote work It's not all good news, however. In some instances, workplaces that offer remote and hybrid arrangements have created or

exacerbated some DEI challenges. Oke points to remote work

platforms that surveil workers as one problematic example. "This

pressure to prove to the manager that the employee is working is

part of the high surveillance systems that are very harmful and

create new inequities that we hadn't planned for," she says.

from home versus in the office. That creates a risk that those

Critics have also pointed out that different members of

### heterogeneous groups will have different preferences for working

who prefer to work in an office will have a closer relationship with their manager, potentially putting them at a competitive advantage when it comes to possible promotions and raises. Research conducted for the Harvard Business Review in 2017 shows that remote employees are more likely "to feel left out and ganged up on than their on-site colleagues." A separate study from PwC found that the least experienced workers were the most likely to want to be in the office more often, and that

they were more likely to value in-person training or meetings.

turn cameras on or off, and other cultural conversations can

100% remote struggle with the networking and relationship-

building that leads to faster internal transfers and career

Plus, stereotypes around productivity, debates about whether to

advancement." A study last year by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that more than two-thirds of managers admit to considering remote workers easier to replace than **on-site** workers, and 62% said that full-time remote work could be detrimental to employees' career objectives. More than seven in ten of the managers surveyed said they would prefer their subordinates to work in the office. Experts call this "proximity bias" or "on-site favoritism." Korn says, "Managers often engage in 'Hey you' tasking, where you just hand out assignments to whoever is around, but that's a clear recipe for on-site favoritism,

which can disadvantage historically excluded groups, since

they're more likely to take remote jobs."

Checking bias

Simply being aware that on-site favoritism exists and working to find other ways to allocate high-profile, career-enhancing projects or opportunities can help managers to counteract it. "Companies must confront and address proximity bias and deal with that as part of their DEI initiatives," Oke says. Another way that managers and company leaders can promote DEI in a hybrid workplace is by not only promoting flexible schedules, but also taking advantage of such flexibility themselves to reduce the stigma of doing so, according to Korn. "The example needs to come from the top, with leadership making it clear that flexible work is encouraged and normalized,"

While there are many potential benefits to the shift to remote and hybrid work, there are important challenges as well. It's important for companies to consider and address those challenges to ensure that their DEI efforts continue to move forward. Photo: Welcome to the Jungle Follow Welcome to the Jungle on Facebook, LinkedIn, and *Instagram*, and subscribe to our *newsletter* to get our latest articles every day! TOPICS DISCUSSED

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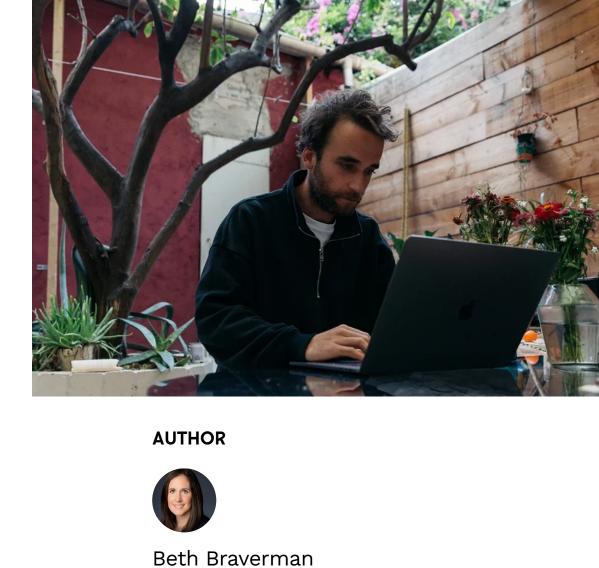
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affect the remote worker experience, Fountain says. "Out of [the workplace] often means out of mind," she adds. "Those that are

Korn says. "They can set that example by not working in the office every single day, and by making sure that work is judged

Companies should also lean into the potential advantages of a

hybrid or remote working arrangement by casting the net wider

when looking for staff and putting resources toward growing

talent in new markets. It's also important that employers pay

geography, and open up internal transfers to anyone, without

restricting them by location, Fountain says. "The mass shift to

impact on the immediate contexts of work as well as the long-

working from home for knowledge workers had a profound

their staff equitably, rather than based on the cost living in that

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term ramifications of corporate decisions and what we include in the scope of corporate DEI."

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