

Remote work can improve equity and diversity, but approach must be mindful, deliberate

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the way Americans work, possibly forever, and local experts say the move toward remote work could improve workplace diversity and equity, but employers must be thoughtful and deliberate when developing hiring practices and a culture of inclusion.



Beckford

Workplace diversity and equity historically were not a major focus for employers, but in recent years organizations have embraced the belief that a workplace including people of various race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and background provides a variety of benefits. As organizations strive to better reflect the populations and communities they serve, experts say the trend toward remote and hybrid workforces could aid those efforts, but only if organizations are fully committed. “It’s going to be really important that we

are thoughtful around equity as we embrace the virtual culture,” said Kevin Beckford, senior director for anti-racism, equity strategies and community engagement at the University of Rochester. “We have to make sure we don’t abandon our efforts to diversify our workforce.”



Searles

The COVID-19 pandemic quickly forced organizations and employers to develop new ways of working, with millions of Americans trading the office for the kitchen table. Employers and employees recognized the potential benefits of remote and hybrid work early on, and for many workers the change could be permanent. “The pandemic has really forced us down this road, and the good news is we’ve learned from it,” Joseph Searles, corporate diversity relations director for Excellus Blue-Cross BlueShield, said of the shift to work-from-home jobs.

Remote and hybrid work may allow organizations to cast a wider geographical net during the hiring process, Searles said, and it also opens job opportunities for parents who stay home with children, caregivers and individuals with disabilities. Keshia Carter, chief diversity officer at Coordinated Care Services Inc. (CCSI), said the shift toward remote work can remove some barriers, but noted organizations must continue to work internally to improve diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Expanding that geographic search area can remove some of those barriers and have more diverse applicants, but that’s not the only thing that’s necessary,” Carter said. “You have to do some of the other work as well.”

Carter pointed to CCSI’s examination of job postings, which resulted in rewriting job postings in a way that made them more appealing and removing other barriers such as education requirements. CCSI instead created an education equivalency chart that credits potential employees for experience in lieu of education.

Flexibility in hours and scheduling offered by remote work can also help, Carter said, noting individuals who care for children or family members may have commitments in those regards. She suggested allowing employees to work four 10-hour days rather than the typically eight hours per day schedule when possible.

“Being able to offer that flexibility is absolutely necessary in order to have an engaged workforce,” Carter said, adding if workers are preoccupied with how they are going to secure

child care or meet other needs outside of work it can negatively impact performance.

Beckford said employers should also be flexible and, when possible, allow employees to work remotely or in an office setting. He pointed out some prospective employees may not have a safe, comfortable or quiet place to work within their home.

Carter said for CCSI it is also very important to understand what the workforce wants, and what works at one organization might not work at another. Leaders within an organization should try to listen to workers, Carter said, and find out what matters most to them and attempt to do those things.

“Know who the folks are that are there and do the things that matter most to the folks who are in the organization,” Carter said. “As leaders it would be really easy for us to sit in a room and say ‘here are the things we think would be best,’ but that might not necessarily be what folks are wanting.”

Though remote work may help organizations recruit and hire more diverse candidates, there’s still significant work required to create a positive workplace culture and retain and develop talent.



Carter

“There are many studies out there that have shown work-life balance and flexibility is a real driver of employee engagement, but it’s not the only thing,” Searles said. “Companies need to continue to work on their culture and diversity and inclusion and employee engagement initiatives to ensure productivity is heightened and the business thrives.”

Beckford said organizations must create a sense of virtual community and develop a workplace culture that allows employees to bring their whole selves to work. He said simple moves, such as starting meeting agendas with a check-in and asking how everyone is doing, can go a long way.

“What we try to do now, which is something that’s pretty refreshing, is helping people bring their whole self to work,” Beckford said. “In some ways it’s allowed people to be more fully themselves because they’re at home.”

Carter said organizations can share stories and engage employees through newsletters or by having virtual coffee on Zoom, sharing pictures of pets or family via Microsoft Teams or various other simple but meaningful interactions and connections. Creating spaces for employees to express themselves can also be key to creating a positive workplace culture and improving employee engagement.

Beckford said remote and hybrid work models have the potential to enhance employees’ work-life balance, improve employee engagement and level the playing field, but those improvements are not automatic. Organizations must be fully committed to creating a culture of diversity, inclusion and equity and keep those efforts in mind at every step in decision-making processes.

“We’re at the early stages of what I believe will be a monumental change,” Beckford said adding a move toward remote work “could be tremendous for equity” and better for the environment, but how that change will take place has not entirely been worked out yet.

“It’s still a moving target and we’re still trying to figure this out.”

Matthew Reitz is Rochester-based freelance writer.