

HAS LOCKDOWN EXACERBATED WORKPLACE INEQUALITY?



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Webinar Summary

This week, Executive Network Group were proud to host their first webinar: *Has Lockdown Exacerbated Workplace Inequality?*

Lockdown has had a dramatic effect on how businesses operate and the employees who work there. Whilst some elements have undeniably improved, there are some indicators to suggest that lockdown has only widened the gap of workplace inequality.

ENG Director Chris Rowlands led the discussion along with Mac Alonge, CEO The Equal Group, and Atholl Duncan, Chair of the Black Isle Group. Here's what they had to say...

Question 1

From a work perspective, who in your opinion suffered most throughout lockdown?

- There has been a clear sector disparity between white and blue collar jobs. The financial services and professional services have been able to continue working almost unscathed throughout lockdown whereas the travel and hospitality industries have been severely damaged and still remain restricted. The ethnic diversity of the workforce within these sectors has certainly exacerbated the inequality that existed pre-Covid.
- There's a clear wealth disparity too. The majority of workers within the lower economic groups simply have not been able to work from home. Either they haven't got the space available for a home office, or their job is more manual and so cannot be done from home. It's easy to talk about the 'new normal' from the perspective of an office job, but for many, working from home hasn't been feasible which has put their professional development at a real disadvantage.
- Age disparity has also been prominent. MOJ data has stated that age discrimination complaints went up 74% in 2020. Many from the older generation as well as those just starting their career have felt pushed out. Particularly for the young, many have lost their jobs and missed out on their professional growth due to a pandemic that actually physical affects them the least.
- There has been polarised experienced between men and women during lockdown. It has always been hard to strike the right balance between work and home responsibilities, but this has been heightened by everyone being pushed back into the home, with many women feeling that they have had to pick up the majority of home schooling and increased home chores on top of their normal workload. A survey carried out by ENG found 100% of women asked felt their career had been worsened during lockdown.

Question 2

What effect has the last 12 months had on employee inclusivity?

- There has been some signs of improvement during lockdown. If we look at mental health, many companies are now far more aware and equipped on how to handle this form of wellbeing.
- Businesses are switching to focusing on tangible performance outputs whilst also taking a more humanistic approach to work-life balance after being exposed to employees lives outside of work. During lockdown everyone has seen more of a merge between the home / work life, be that with children running in on zoom calls, or dressing more casually than they would in office. This has made companies realise that employees need and thrive with greater work-life balance. From this greater flexibility, a more inclusive workplace for all is subsequently being created.
- For those starting a new job, leadership teams must to ensure that they feel included through improved on-boarding. This has been a challenge throughout lockdown. New starters are missing a lot of the simple 'coffee-talk' introductions, this lack of social interaction can mean it takes longer for workers to understand the culture and feel a part of the business. This why internal communication is important, to keep all employees engaged and share a common purpose.

Question 3

We all seem to have accepted that “hybrid working” will be the new norm for many, what will be the affect on employees, on social mobility and on workplace equality?

- As already mentioned hybrid working isn't a possibility for everyone. Many banks have actually took a stand against hybrid working, stating that they want their employees to always been in office as home working stifles innovation. That said, research has shown the majority of employees would prefer the hybrid model. Those that attended the webinar voted in a poll on their preferred benefit of hybrid working; greater work life balance came up on top.
- As humans we are not made to sit in an office all day regardless of how busy we are. Presence does not correlate to productivity. There needs to be a switch to working in an creative environment where individuals can thrive. Equally home-working needs to stop being viewed as a perk. It comes with expectations and (particularly over the last 12 months) elevated levels of commitment, creating blurred lines on work/life balance.
- Leaders should now be asking “How can we get the best out of each individual that works for us?”. A one size approach fits nobody. Leadership teams need to see people as individuals and offer the flexibility that suits them in order to bring the best out of them.
- We have an opportunity to reinvent how we work, which can provide greater flexibility to all making the workplace far more inclusive. Hybrid working should theoretically widen the net and open doors to a more diverse pool of talent (subject to effective recruitment and onboarding methods).

Question 4

What does the post-lockdown economy look like for entrepreneurs and emerging leaders?

·Atholl, one of our panellist, has recently published a book - Leaders in Lockdown - which follows the approach to handling the Covid-19 crisis of 20 business leaders across the world.

From his insights, Atholl states that many entrepreneurs have strived to find opportunities during the last 12 months, focusing how they can build back better. This suggests that the pandemic will not stifle entrepreneurs in the long-run.

·New emerging styles of leadership. There as certainly been a rise in empathetic leadership, the shockwave created by the pandemic has made people stop and think more. Evidence suggests that managers are now trying to better their understanding of employees experiences and needs both inside and outside of work.

·Equally we are witnessing an emergence of more inclusive leadership, those who are aware of their own biases and preferences, and actively seek out and consider different views and perspectives to inform better decision-making. Taking more of commitment to workplace D&I.

Question 5

Lessons learned from lockdown. What steps should business leaders be taking to build a more diverse workforce and a more equitable workplace?

·Lockdown has exposed the leaders that genuinely care about their staff (empathetic, inquisitive, authentic leadership). Businesses that care will attract top talent and prosper going forward.

·Businesses should be gathering data on employee experiences: quantitative and qualitative and using this to guide their next steps as we come out of lockdown.

·To improve diversity, businesses should embrace technology that supports inclusivity, and remove biases from recruitment processes.

·Review job roles, review organisational design and genuinely think about how teams & functions could and should interact with increased flexibility.

·Companies that embrace flexibility need to build this and start from a position of trust; including a switching to output driven performance management.

·Ultimately as we emerge out of lockdown, leaders need to reflect on the make-up of their own workforce as well as analyse their external brand to understand how they are being perceived in the market by different groups. By doing this they can work on how to attract a more diverse workforce – and flexibility will be key to achieving this.