

Research survey results:

The impact of remote work on inclusion

jostle

DI·A·LEC·TIC

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Introduction

The global pandemic has rewritten the old workplace rules. Almost overnight, millions of jobs we assumed needed to be done on-site were converted to remote positions, leaving individuals and organizations little time to adapt to the new paradigm.

Among those new to remote work, the rapid switch introduced new barriers¹ to inclusion², like social isolation, communication obstacles, technological challenges, and work/life balance implications. These new barriers intersect with and may further compound existing barriers to inclusion, such as discrimination, underrepresentation, and stereotypes.

The full impact of this rapid transition is yet to be fully understood. This is particularly true as it relates to how included and connected people feel at work.

Jostle and Dialectic recently completed a research study to understand this impact on individuals at work. We heard from over 400 employees who had transitioned to remote work in the past year without changing employers.

We examined how barriers to inclusion impact individual well-being, the ability to perform work, and feelings of belonging. At the organizational level, we explored the impact on workplace culture, communication, and engagement.

Barriers to inclusion make it difficult for employees to cohere with their team or organization and feel like their contributions matter, which in turn can reduce their motivation to participate and succeed. Remote work may make these difficulties even more pronounced.

The results of this research are providing a better understanding of the current state of inclusion at work, and the employee perception of barriers to inclusion at the individual and organizational levels.

We are now equipped with information about where employees are struggling, how leaders and organizations are adapting, and what needs to be done to improve remote work so that everyone feels included and connected.

The findings of this survey will help leaders address the barriers to inclusion created by the rapid shift to remote work and inform actions to create more human-centric organizations that prioritize connected employees and supportive workplace cultures, regardless of where people are located.

¹ In this context, we define barriers as anything that prevents inclusion or interrupts feelings of belonging and/or connection to others in the workplace.

² In this context, we define inclusion as feeling a sense of belonging, where an individual feels accepted, supported, and embraced for who they are.

Executive summary



Working remotely has created new barriers to workplace inclusion, and has muted the norms and practices of workplace culture that build belonging.

82% of respondents report communication obstacles and 83% report feeling disconnected from their workplace culture. Organizations that are serious about their culture need to reimagine how to build it in the age of remote work.



Performance has increased while feelings of belonging have decreased.

Nearly 70% of participants felt their teams work just as well now as they did before working remotely during the pandemic, while 61% report that remote work makes them feel less connected to their co-workers. This is unsustainable over the long-term.



Managers' relationships with their team members have become more transactional and less supportive.

35% of participants feel they are given more responsibilities by their managers, yet 54% of participants feel their supervisor does not provide them with the support needed to deal with issues arising from working remotely. Asking employees to shoulder more responsibility with less support is untenable in the long run and could lead to costly burnout and turnover.



Process and function driven remote workplace cultures are alienating employees.

Over 80% of people feel they have access to the tools and resources they need to work remotely, but 30% feel less fulfilled by their work. Organizations need to de-escalate from crisis mode as soon as possible and return their focus to the human side of work.



Sick time is being underutilized and will threaten employee well-being and productivity.

52% of participants experienced stress at work in the past year caused by work overload, but 70% report taking *fewer* sick days than in years past. 59% report using few to no sick days for mental health reasons. Crisis response and mental health-related presenteeism is a major risk to employee well-being, productivity, and performance.



Remote work is here to stay despite the burden.

75% of respondents would choose to continue working remotely, with a desire to do so almost two thirds of the time, while only 3% say that there is nothing good about remote work. There is no putting the genie back in the bottle. Remote work will be a fixture of modern workplaces.

Finding #1

Working remote has created new barriers to workplace inclusion

Have experienced at least 'a little bit' of:

- 85%** Social isolation
- 83%** Disconnection from workplace culture
- 82%** Communication obstacles
- 76%** Work/life integration challenges
- 73%** Information imbalances
- 72%** Technological challenges



Barriers to workplace inclusion are not new. To wit—between 40% and 50% of survey participants indicated that prior to the pandemic, they experienced the barriers of poor mental well-being or discrimination 'at least a little bit.'

What *is* new, however, is the exacerbation and expansion of workplace inclusion barriers as a result of the rapid shift to remote work.

The results speak for themselves. 85% of participants experienced at least 'a little bit' of social isolation, 83% disconnection from workplace culture, 82% communication obstacles, 76% work/life integration challenges, 73% information imbalances, and 72% technological challenges.

The issues that impacted participants most significantly were social isolation (23%), work/life integration challenges (25%), and disconnection from the workplace culture (30%).

These findings affirm what many of us have been feeling: working from home leads to fewer interactions with coworkers and mutes the norms and practices of workplace culture. It also affords little psychological and physical separation between work and home life.

If there is a silver lining to the impact of the pandemic for our experience at work, it may be that the widespread experience of social isolation—and its knock-on effects—have destigmatized the need for substantive mental health supports, and set into sharp relief the importance of mental health for employee well-being and performance.

Organizations hoping to maintain or establish their desired workplace culture need to take stock of their values and cultural practices, determine if and how they can be maintained while working remotely, and then implement any changes required to maintain their culture.

Finding #2

Performance is better but belonging is worse

61%

Feel that remote work makes them less connected to their co-workers

77%

Socialize with their co-workers much less frequently (to not at all)

19%

Feel that remote working has made them feel excluded from their co-workers

70%

Felt their teams work just as well now as they did before working remotely during the pandemic

17%

Feel their team works even better now working remotely

Empirical theories of employee motivation and performance³ predict that an employee's feeling of *belonging* while among their coworkers and within their organization is key to their performance.

It is therefore surprising that, while our data shows a general decrease in employee *belonging*—61% of participants feel that remote work makes them less connected to their co-workers, 77% report socializing with their co-workers much less frequently (to not at all), and 19% feel that remote working has made them feel excluded from their co-workers—nearly 70% felt their teams work just as well now as they did before working remotely during the pandemic, and 17% feel their team works even better.

In other words, during the pandemic, employees' perceptions of their and their teams' performance have increased while their feelings of belonging have decreased. This is precisely the opposite of what the empirical work predicts.

Our hypothesis is that, following the initial shock of the pandemic, and even taking into consideration the challenges with work/life integration noted earlier, the nature of remote work has returned a *short-term* benefit on employee performance by allowing for more and better focused time on work tasks (e.g. by eliminating time spent commuting and by reducing the number of non-work related interactions with co-workers). Focused time may be harder to come by given the complexities of home life during the pandemic, but when employees get to their work, they are focused, task-oriented, and productive.

What the empirical model predicts is that these short-term gains in performance will eventually be eclipsed by *long-term* losses if employees' feelings of belonging are allowed to remain chronically low. Improving employee belonging is therefore paramount for all organizations both during and beyond the pandemic, especially for those considering moving to a permanent remote or hybrid work model.

³ https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf

Finding #3

Relationships with managers are more transactional and less supportive

54%

feel their supervisor does not provide them with the support needed to deal with issues arising from working remotely

Working remotely during the pandemic has left employees with more responsibility but less support from their managers. Since working remotely, 59% of participants feel that their manager provides them with more freedom to make decisions, and 35% feel they are given more responsibilities to lead projects.

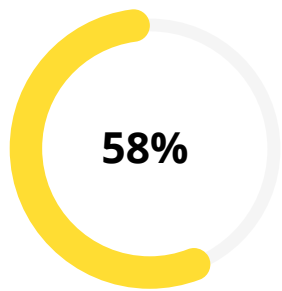
However, only 24% feel their manager checks in on their progress more often now. 54% of participants feel their supervisor does not provide them with the support needed to deal with issues arising from working remotely. Only 20% felt that their relationship with their manager has improved.

One way of interpreting these results is that relationships between coworkers and between employees and managers have become more *transactional* during the pandemic: meetings and conversations focus mostly on getting the work done. Yet, follow through and support for assigned work tasks is much more difficult for managers in a remote setting: our physical distance from one another makes it much more challenging and effortful to ask and receive help on an ad hoc basis. This leaves employees without critical support in moments of need.

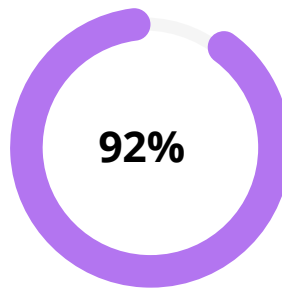
Shouldering more responsibility with less support is untenable in the long run for most employees, and it is likely to lead to burnout, poor mental and physical well-being, and negative team performance and business results. Organizations would do well to help managers provide employees with more ongoing support while they work remotely, rather than simply focusing on what needs to get done and by whom.

Finding #4

Process and function-driven workplace cultures are alienating employees



58% feel that they socialize much less frequently with co-workers



92% say when they do connect with co-workers it is mostly for work-related reasons

Over 80% of people feel they have access to the tools, resources, IT, and HR support they need to work remotely, and employees themselves are performing better. Despite these findings, structure and responsibility alone are not sufficient for taking care of the human aspects of working together remotely. Furthermore, this focus on process and function may be alienating people from each other and their work.

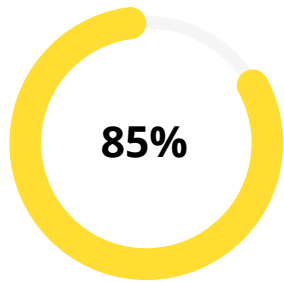
Even though 55% of respondents reported that they are more productive at home, 30% are less fulfilled by their work since working remotely. 34% felt their workplace became more negative with remote working, and 61% felt less connected to their co-workers than before they began working remotely. The impact? 58% feel that they socialize much less frequently, and, when respondents do connect with their co-workers, 92% say it is mostly for work-related reasons. This is creating alienated and lonely people who are likely losing interest in their work.

One way to explain this widespread alienation is that organizations quickly shifted into operational crisis mode in order to ease the transition to remote work at the beginning of the pandemic. Organizations in crisis place more emphasis on getting the work done, and will prioritize the functional support and resources necessary to ensure continuity. Unfortunately, this means less attention gets paid to employees' needs for connection, belonging, and inclusion. Employees are likely also missing incidental conversations, opportunities to connect, and friendship with co-workers. In the absence of physical spaces like kitchens, work areas, and hallways, it is hard to re-create spur-of-the-moment engagement and a sense of shared experience.

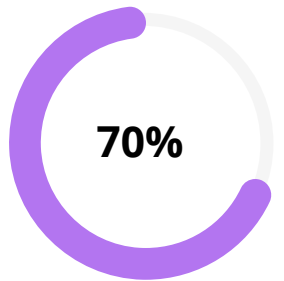
Since 24% of people feel that being isolated from colleagues is the hardest part of working remotely, followed closely by 22% feeling like they are 'always on,' organizations must now shift away from transactional cultures to human-centred cultures. The current mode of operating is neither sustainable nor desirable. It may have been necessary to enable the tremendous shift that took place due to COVID-19, but the emphasis must now be placed on human connection as we normalize all forms of remote workplaces.

Finding #5

Sick time is being underutilized and will threaten employee well-being and productivity



85% feel they can take time off for illness without worrying about losing their job



Close to 70% of participants report taking fewer sick days this year than in the past.

It is not surprising that the shift to remote work is taking a toll on individual well-being. Participants experienced stress at work in the past year from overload of work (52%), worrying about job security (52%), and trying to balance work and family obligations (48%). Additional stress arrived in the form of technological issues (39%) and stress from having to learn new technologies for remote work (21%).

The good news is that roughly 75% of people feel their company supports physical and mental well-being and has made them aware of mental health resources. Additionally, 85% feel they can take time off for illness without worrying about losing their job.

In spite of this, close to 70% of participants report taking fewer sick days this year than in the past. In light of our findings related to increased productivity and better performance, we assert that a form of “presenteeism” is impacting the incidence of sick time. The employee response to crisis mode is to move into overdrive too, leading to feelings of always being ‘on’ and a blurring of work and personal life. Furthermore, since people are not required to present themselves in the office, they might more easily rationalize doing work when unwell, especially if they have light symptoms.

While this has obvious repercussions on the physical well-being of employees, the impact on mental wellness is yet to be fully understood and appreciated. The dangers of an always-on culture of work that we have seen unfold in the past year include depression, burnout, and longer term decreases in productivity. Deloitte estimates that “the costs to employers of mental health-related presenteeism are roughly three-and-a-half times the cost of mental health-related absence⁴.”

⁴ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consultancy/deloitte-uk-mental-health-and-employers.pdf>

Finding #5

Sick time is being underutilized and will threaten employee well-being and productivity **(con't)**

59%

used few to no sick days for mental health reasons in the past year

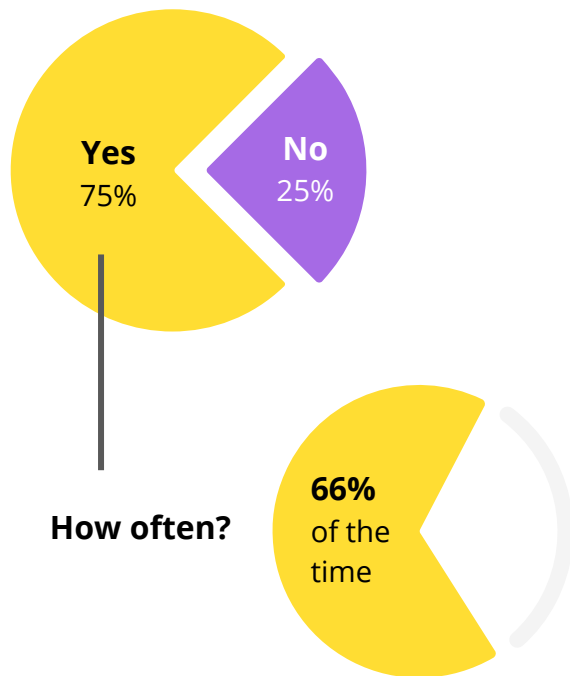
In our study, 59% of respondents used few to no sick days for mental health reasons in the past year. This may be due to the presenteeism issues discussed above, combined with the lack of support from managers and companies for mental wellness issues. 54% of respondents do not receive the support they need to manage difficulties arising from working remotely. Even though the need for mental wellness infrastructure at work may now be more recognized, the stigma associated with mental illness—which, as noted earlier, we expect to lessen as a result of the pandemic—may also be preventing employees from taking sick time for mental health reasons.

It is clear that employers should address three key areas of their employee wellness framework in order for employees to feel more supported and healthy. First, managers should encourage employees to take sick time when they are ill or to avoid burnout. Second, the definition of sick time should be expanded to explicitly include mental health, or a new allowance for mental wellness should be established. Third, creating more inclusive workplaces, where individual wellness needs and requirements are supported, is critical for overall employee well-being.

Finding #6

Remote work is here to stay despite the burden

Continue to work remotely?



Given the option, 75% of respondents would choose to continue working remotely, with a desire to do so almost two thirds of the time. The chief reasons cited were reduced commute, freedom to set one's own schedule, and more time with family.

The vast majority of respondents feel this way, despite not having the right physical environment for remote work (25%) or a good work/life balance (40%). It is evident that the perceived personal benefits from remote work far outweigh the additional burden.

However, the true cost of disconnection and inclusion barriers caused by remote work are yet to be quantified. Personal assessments of how well things are going might also be overestimated. For example, only 2% of people found collaborating and communication to be the biggest challenges resulting from working from home.

Despite these red flags, remote work is almost certainly here to stay. Only 3% of our respondents feel there is nothing good about working remotely. Employers must quickly accept and attend to the idea that most workers are not going back to the way things were.

Flexibility is no longer a key differentiator or a perk in the war for talent; it is a requirement and an expectation. Organizations have no choice but to adapt their practices and policies to support individual life design (which includes choosing to live outside of the geographic location of company headquarters) in order to recruit and retain talent.

Echoing what we concluded in other findings of this survey, organizations should be thinking about inclusion as an expression of what each individual needs to work well and feel engaged, by their own choice. Healthy and vibrant people and workplace cultures will not be created by focusing on structure and resources alone. Remote workers need human connection as much as in-person staff do.

Key actions to take

1

Integrate belonging into workplace culture.

Look at your current communication practices and pay attention to your choice of words and language. Do they encourage or discourage inclusion and belonging?

Observe your values in action. Are they helping to create a culture of inclusion?

Start an employee buddy-system that encourages regular check-ins within and across teams, and bridges senior and junior employee levels.

2

Strike a balance between productivity and belonging.

Explore which parts of your current operations are still in crisis mode favouring getting work done regardless of the toll it is taking on people (hint: it is likely those places where people are most burned out).

Look at the boundaries (or lack thereof) between work and life; what habits or behaviours do you need to start? Some examples include setting core working hours, video call dark zones, and async best practices.

Give every employee space to set their own schedule and work habits that work best for them, and encourage a focus on output over time spent.

3

Shift manager mindsets from transacting with to supporting employees.

Ask managers what they need to help their team members; it might be training, a new tool, or more one-on-one time with employees.

Ask employees what support means to them. It may not be possible to meet all expectations, but asking is the most important step.

It starts from the top; senior leaders must build a culture of encouragement to support managers too.

Key actions to take

4

Focus less on process and more on the human side of work.

Find ways to add spur-of-the-moment interactions during the work day, like a random coffee chat generator or pick up the phone and call a co-worker.

Encourage employees to share something about themselves; perhaps a weekly employee spotlight on your intranet or social event icebreakers.

Reflect on your meeting culture. Are they too long, unnecessary, unfairly structured, strictly business? This is the place for big wins with small changes to humanize work.

5

Encourage overall well-being with a progressive sick time policy.

Review your current sick time policy. Does it support overall well-being and advocate for burnout reduction?

Consider adding additional sick time for mental well-being or allocating a new category of time off for mental wellness—and encourage employees to use them.

Talk to your managers about empathy and support for unique individual wellness needs.

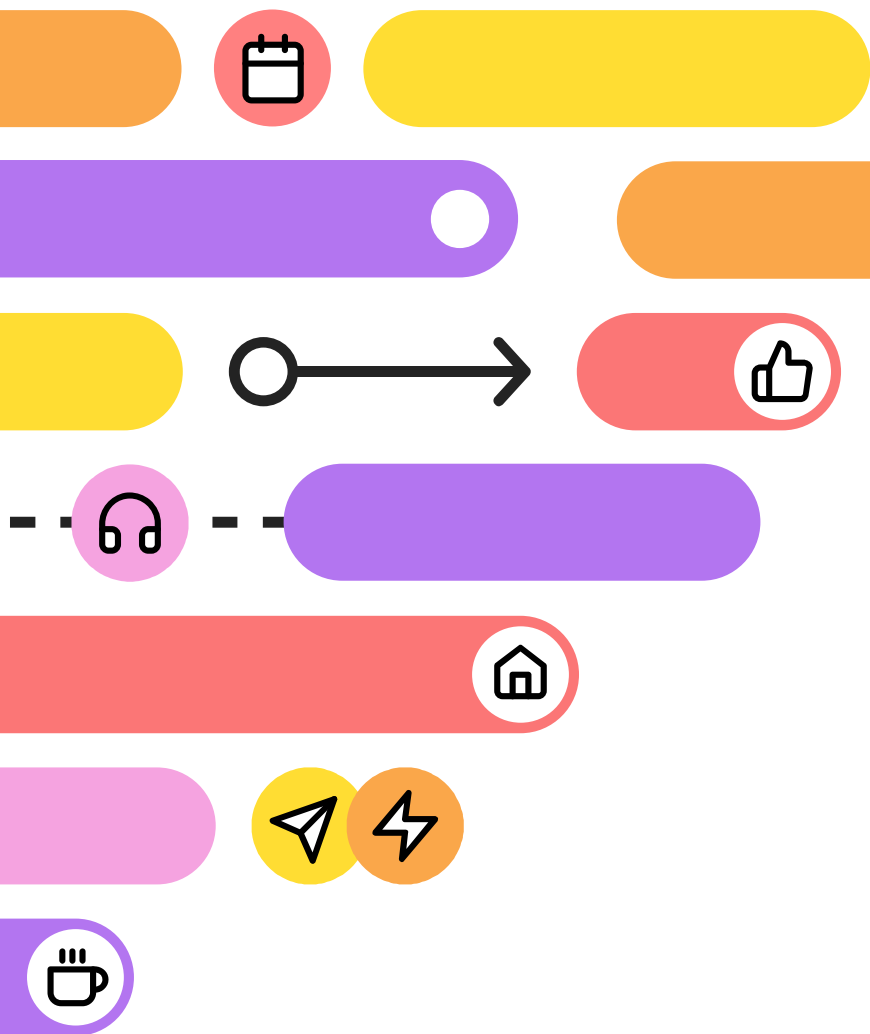
6

Articulate your remote work position, now.

Accelerate conversations with executive and leadership teams on how you will work going forward. Employees already have questions. If you do not have the answer just yet, acknowledge that you are working on it.

Ask employees what their preferences are. Do not be afraid to hear their responses; after all, it is their workplace too.

Communicate with employees as soon as possible. The world has already shifted and so will your people if you do not address this topic head on.



Conclusion

Remote and other hybrid forms of working are now the norm. There is no going back. The challenge now is to understand how we evolve to make the best of this new set of circumstances.

In our study, **we observed one clear message: the cost of short term planning is a long term negative impact on human inclusion and connection at work.** The transactional crisis mode that might have been necessary to adapt to large-scale remote work is not sustainable. It has created environments where people lack human connection, which in turn is eroding relationships and workplace culture while intensifying feelings of exclusion.

It is evident that organizations are providing support, training, and resources, but it is the more complex human-level attention that is lacking. Organizations should be focused on the human interface within work settings (enhancing casual interactions, building camaraderie, and supporting individual needs and challenges) over and above what is needed to simply get work done.

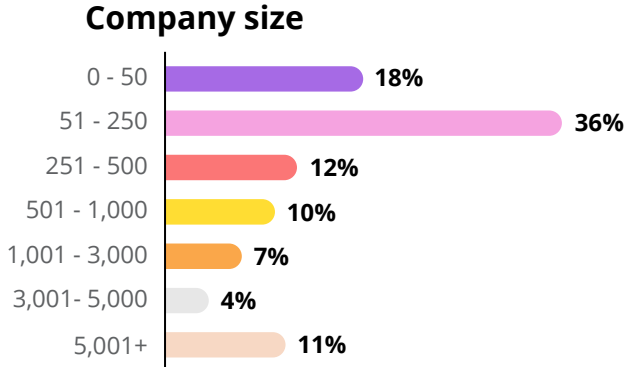
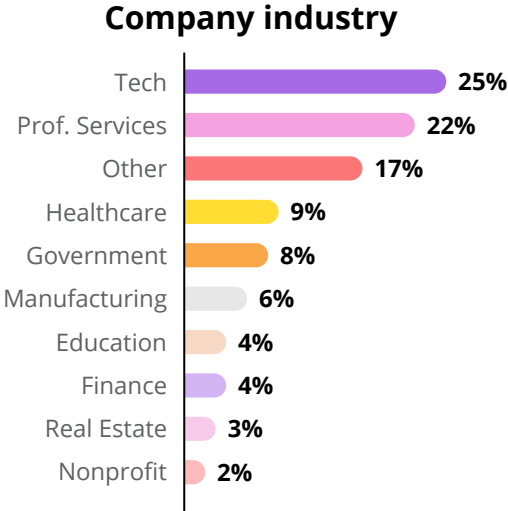
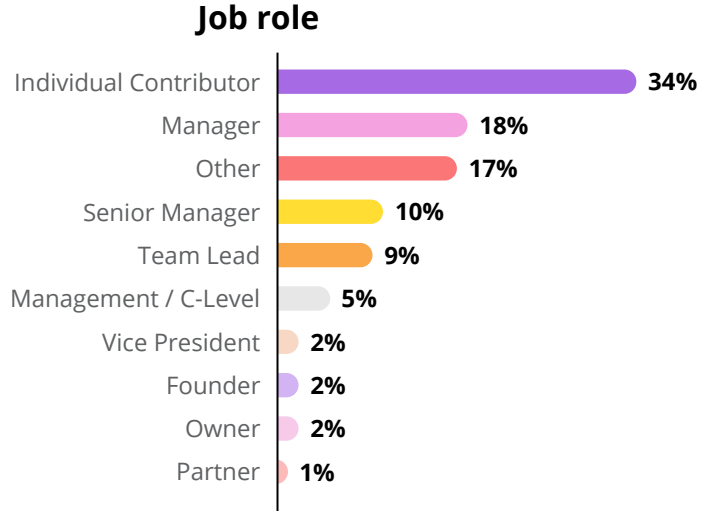
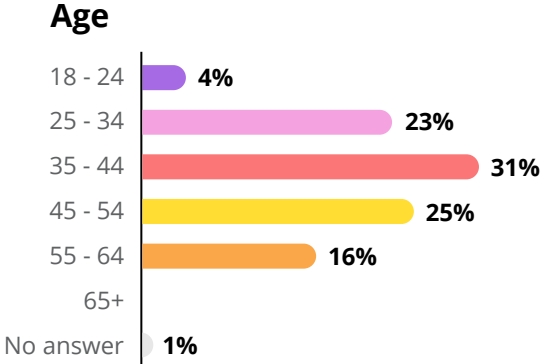
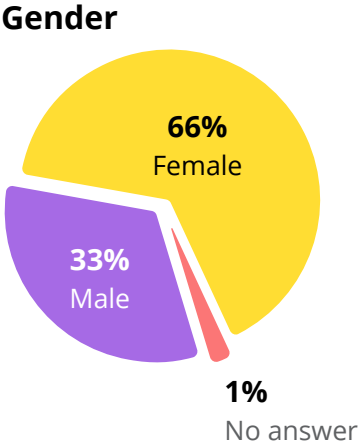
We set out to understand the impact of remote work on inclusion and connection. In each of our six key findings, we see that remote work has indeed introduced new forms of exclusion and exacerbated existing barriers to inclusion. We conclude the biggest opportunity to overcome this for both employees and organizations is to bring rigorous human-centric thinking to building workplace cultures and ways of working together.

The remote workplace does not exist in spite of people, it thrives because of people; which is no different than what we would expect from physical places of work. Creating work environments where humans matter has never been more imperative to sustained success.

The survey

This report is based on a survey of 406 remote workers who remained with the same employer before and after the shift to remote work due to COVID-19. Respondents were predominantly from Canada and the US, with minor representation from the UK, Australasia, Europe, Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and Asia.

The survey data was collected between November 2020 and January 2021 and consisted of 54 individual questions focused on demographics, barriers to inclusion, and the impact of remote work on connection to peers and managers, workplace culture, and individual life/work demands and needs.



The researchers



Bev Attfield

Principal of Workplace Science, **Jostle**



Bev ensures that Jostle is a workplace where everyone feels included, supported, and engaged at work. Beyond Jostle, Bev pays close attention to the way people engage at work, and is curious about what creates the optimal conditions for individual fulfilment and human-centric workplaces. She is a regular contributor to the Jostle blog and host of the People at Work podcast.



Jostle helps leaders build connected organizations so that everyone at work can unite and grow together. We do this with our turnkey employee intranet and our online knowledge communities, both of which help leaders lead. Our approach works: Jostle intranets are the go-to place for our customers' employees, delivering industry-leading employee participation rates. Since 2009, we have helped over 1,000 organizations connect their people.

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Dr. Aaron Barth

Founder & President, **Dialectic**



Aaron has led comprehensive research on unconscious bias and inclusion training. He has a moral interest in making people's day-to-day lives better through critical thinking and supporting companies with their DE&I strategy. Aaron is also the founder of Dialectic's diversity, equity, and inclusion Learning Snippets.



Dialectic creates inclusive, science-based learning experiences for workplaces. Our work to improve the lives of people at work is guided by our commitment to using the insights and methods of science, and to honouring the voice and experiences of employees. Founded in 2011 by Dr. Aaron Barth, Dialectic creates profound impact for clients large and small—Global 500 companies, small to medium-sized enterprises, public-sector organizations, and nonprofits.

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“

I believe we are here on the planet Earth to live, grow up, and do what we can to make this world a better place for all people to enjoy freedom.

- Rosa Parks