

RESEARCH BRIEF

Telework After COVID: Challenges and Opportunities for Workers with Disabilities

March 2023

Based on three papers published as part of the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Center:

- Ameri, M., Kruse, D., Park, S. R., Rodgers, Y., & Schur, L. (2022). [Telework during the pandemic: Patterns, challenges, and opportunities for people with disabilities](#). *Disability and Health Journal*, 101406.
- Kruse, D., Park, S. R., van der Meulen Rodgers, Y., & Schur, L. (2022). [Disability and remote work during the pandemic with implications for cancer survivors](#). *Journal of Cancer Survivorship*, 16(1), 183-199.
- Schur, L. A., Ameri, M., & Kruse, D. (2020). [Telework after COVID: a “silver lining” for workers with disabilities?](#). *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 30(4), 521-536.

For years, people with disabilities have advocated for remote work as a reasonable accommodation to address commuting barriers, home medical needs, environmental sensitivities, fatigue, and other employment barriers. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has ruled that telework may be a form of reasonable accommodation under the ADA.¹ However, employers have often denied telework accommodation requests, claiming that physical presence in the workplace is an essential part of the job. The COVID-19 pandemic has called into question these objections. Employers across

KEY FINDINGS

- For workers with disabilities, options for remote work can foster financial stability.
- Workers with disabilities are more likely to work in blue-collar jobs less conducive to telework. These jobs are often lower paying and more unstable.
- Rates of remote work are highest for people with mobility impairments, difficulty with self-care, and difficulty going outside alone.
- During the Pandemic, workers with disabilities were more likely to lose their jobs, less likely to receive pay while out of work, and more likely to have difficulty accessing medical care.
- Workers with disabilities seem to have more telework opportunities in tight labor markets.



the country and in many industries were forced to rely on extended periods of telework for employees regardless of their disability status, with no impact on productivity.

This increased acceptance of telework offers a promising opportunity to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Recent studies by DIEP researchers recognize the promise of telework but highlight that people with disabilities are less likely than those without disabilities to be in jobs that can be done remotely. This may limit the value of telework in addressing the low employment rate of people with disabilities. This brief reviews the findings and provides policy recommendations to address the challenge.

Telework is valuable to people with disabilities

Telework has the potential to enable work opportunities for people with disabilities. As Schur et al. (2020) note, it offers flexibility for people who have physical or mental impairments that make it more challenging to work in traditional workplace settings. Telework reduces commuting time and cost for people with mobility impairments who find it difficult or costly to travel outside the home. It also benefits people with mental health, cognitive issues, or chronic illnesses, or those who may require frequent breaks, need a less work stressful environment, or need to remain close to medical equipment and therapeutics at home. It may also help people with recurring medical appointments, unpredictable flare-ups of their conditions, or other issues that make working consistently at a job site difficult, if not impossible (Schur et al. 2020). The rates of home-based work are highest among workers with mobility impairments, people who have difficulty with self-care, or who have difficulty going outside alone (Schur et al. 2020).

Even if workers are allowed to work from home, they risk being “out of sight, out of mind,” and passed over for growth opportunities and promotions. These concerns are particularly important for people with disabilities, many of whom need telework options as an accommodation.

Prior to the pandemic, people with disabilities were more likely to work from home compared to those without disabilities

In *Telework After COVID-19: A ‘Silver Lining’ for Workers with Disabilities?*, Schur et al. (2020) found that prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people with disabilities were more likely to work from home, compared to those without disabilities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 5.5% of people with disabilities worked from home, compared to 4.4% of people without disabilities.

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However, these telework jobs were not necessarily the solution. In general, workers with disabilities tend to be in lower-wage jobs than workers without disabilities. This discrepancy remains in telework jobs. This means that while increased availability of home-based work may create more employment opportunities for workers with disabilities, it is unlikely to address the wage inequalities.

During the pandemic, workers with disabilities were less likely to be in jobs that were suitable for remote work and, as a result, more likely to be laid off.

In *Disability and remote work during the pandemic with implications for cancer survivors*, Kruse et al. (2022) found that when “non-essential” workers began working remotely in March 2020, people with disabilities experienced more layoffs compared to people without disabilities. It also took longer for people with disabilities to regain employment when the employment effects of the pandemic eased in the latter part of 2020. Thirty-six percent of people without disabilities reported teleworking during the pandemic, compared with only 25% of people with disabilities.

People with disabilities experience greater employment outcomes when labor markets are competitive

Evidence from Ameri et al. (2022) shows that competitive labor markets result in people with disabilities having more opportunities for remote work. Increases in employment rates are more associated with the rise in telework for people with disabilities than they are for people without disabilities. In some cases, over half (51.8%) of the increase in the employment rate for people with disabilities is due to telework employment, compared to less than a third (30.5%) for people without disabilities (Ameri et al. 2022). Furthermore, because people with disabilities have lower employment rates to begin with, the increase in employment opportunities was more pronounced for this group (Ameri et al. 2022).

Overall, more than half of the gap in telework between people with and without disabilities during the pandemic is explained by differences in occupational distribution.

Much of the disparity in telework between people with and without disabilities is explained by the type of jobs that people with disabilities tend to hold and how the pandemic affected different occupations and industries. Workers with disabilities are underrepresented in white-collar jobs — the jobs that are most conducive to telework and are overrepresented in service and blue-collar occupations, the jobs that were hit the hardest with job losses at the beginning of the pandemic. Only 34 percent of workers with disabilities have jobs that



can be done entirely remotely, compared to 40 percent of those without disabilities (Kruse, et al. 2021).

Recommendations for Policy and/or Practice

The pandemic has led to a greater acceptance of telework and a deeper understanding of the types of work that can be accomplished remotely. This could help boost the traditionally-low employment rate for people with disabilities. However, if workers with disabilities are clustered in jobs that are less conducive to telework, the benefit of telework for people with disabilities may not be fully realized.

These results shine new light on the importance of longer-term structural changes to the occupational distribution to ensure that people with disabilities are less concentrated in blue-collar and essential service jobs that tend to have lower pay and less job security. More policy guidance is needed to address the following:

- a. Help employers tailor remote jobs to people with disabilities;
- b. Help people with disabilities realize the skills needed for the remote jobs expected to become available in coming years; and
- c. Increase internet access for people with disabilities to expand remote work possibilities. For more information, read the [Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy Report on Disability and the Digital Divide](#).

Data and Methods

This brief is based on peer-reviewed journal articles that use data from the American Community Survey (which established the six disability categories of visual, hearing, cognitive, and mobility impairments and activity limitations of difficulty with self-care and difficulty going outside alone), the American Time Use Survey (from 2008-2018), and the Current Population Survey Disability Supplement.

References

- Ameri, M., Kruse, D., Park, S. R., Rodgers, Y., & Schur, L. (2022). [Telework during the pandemic: Patterns, challenges, and opportunities for people with disabilities](#). *Disability and Health Journal*, 101406.
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¹ In 1999, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued the *Enforcement Guidance on Reasonable Accommodation and Undue Hardship Under the Americans with Disabilities Act* where they stated telework may be a form of reasonable accommodation under the ADA. In 2003, EEOC issued additional guidance, *Work at Home/Telework as a Reasonable Accommodation*, explaining how employers may use existing telework programs or allow an individual to work at home as a reasonable accommodation. [However, U.S. courts often side with employers and rule that telework is not a reasonable accommodation.](#)

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