Dive In

The Festival
for Diversity & Inclusion in Insurance

Local Voice, Global Impact

Deep Dive on Inclusion Survey 2020

Liberty Specialty Markets

SURA

wotton kearney

ANZIIF

Foreword

Inclusion remains an important issue for the insurance industry, particularly given the broader work-related challenges we have all faced during the pandemic.

Liberty Specialty Markets, SURA and Wotton + Kearney, together with ANZIIF, are pleased to continue supporting this thought-provoking annual survey. Through Dr Jennifer Whelan's work, we are able to shine a light on how experiences of workplace inclusion are affecting diverse people working in the insurance and risk industry. The challenge for us all is to build on that understanding and identify ways to drive impactful, positive change.

The 2019 survey showed that men, older people, leaders and people who can do some or all of their work remotely feel a stronger sense of inclusion than others. We have revisited those themes this year – with some particularly revealing findings.

This year's survey also looked at how the insurance and risk industry has been affected by COVID-19. The quality of data collected, despite the skew the pandemic has caused, offers valuable insights into how included, connected and psychologically safe people in the industry feel working remotely.

This report is just one of the diversity and inclusion initiatives Liberty Specialty Markets, SURA and Wotton + Kearney invest in. We are proud to support this important research and would be delighted to hear your thoughts on how its findings could benefit your business.

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Introduction

2020 has brought unprecedented global disruption with the emergence of COVID-19. Most countries have experienced some degree of lockdown restrictions and prolonged social isolation requirements. As a result, vast numbers of employees have experienced a radical shift in the way they work, from being mostly office-based to working remotely or from home. For many of us, these remain ongoing challenges as we adapt to what may well become a 'new normal'. This year's Dive In Festival theme of "Local Voice, Global Impact" perfectly reflects the challenges of tackling a global challenge, while being largely confined to our homes and physically distant from colleagues, family and friends.

In 2019, we took a deep dive into how inclusion is experienced by diverse people working in the insurance and risk industry. In line with broader research, we found that some people feel more included than others; men, older people, leaders, and people who can do some or all of their work remotely feel a stronger sense of inclusion than others. The results from 2019 provided an important first look at inclusion in the insurance and risk industry in Australia and the first industry-based benchmarks on inclusion.

In August this year, we conducted the survey again with over 600 people working in the insurance and risk industry. Our aim was twofold. Firstly, we wanted to explore changes in inclusion over time, with the hope of seeing a positive impact as more and more organisations invest in building a more inclusive culture. Data on the representation of diverse people in the industry is still lacking, but we do know that capability-building and training around inclusion have become more widespread.

While the original hope was to find evidence of improvements in inclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had such profound and largely negative impact on every aspect of life – ranging from our mental and physical health, our job and economic security, our family and social relationships. As a result, the results from this year's study are unlikely to be comparable to previous (or future) years. 2020 will go down in history as an atypical year by any measure.

However, COVID-19 has presented us with an invaluable opportunity to look at how workplaces adapt during a crisis, and the work-related challenges posed by the global pandemic play directly into inclusion. There are two good reasons to expect that many of the impacts of COVID-19 would represent a challenge to how included and connected people feel at work.

Firstly, mainstreaming flexible work practices has been a common goal in diversity and inclusion work, and COVID-19 has ushered in an unprecedented era in which many, if not most employees carry out all or most of their work remotely. For most people, this has meant working from home much or all of the time. Secondly, given that many people believe that inclusion can act as a protective factor against change and disruption, and especially for diverse people, exploring experiences of inclusion during this crisis is particularly useful.

The new normal: inclusion in a COVID-19 world

The survey results from 2019 showed that the ability to have flexibility in how and where you work was associated with feelings of greater inclusion. This is borne out in research more broadly. We also know that the availability of comprehensive flexible work practices is a key factor in retaining, developing, and promoting women and people with caring responsibilities.

Recent research by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) and the BankWest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) adds to growing evidence that greater representation of women at senior and board levels increases an organisation's likelihood of outperforming in their sector, and drives a 5% increase in market value. Women's representation in leadership generally is steadily increasing and the national pay gap is at its lowest in years. The case for inclusion has never been stronger.

However, whilst COVID-19 has resulted in such a widespread and rapid move to working remotely, it has also brought with it a range of broader challenges around financial and job security, social connectedness, health and wellbeing. Organisations have had to adapt rapidly, and this level of change and uncertainty usually comes at a cost.

According to the Diversity Council of Australia (DCA), women have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 in so far as they are more likely to have lost employment or had their hours reduced. We also know women have borne more of the responsibilities of home schooling children, which presents additional challenges to working from home. A recent Catalyst study mirrored these findings with results showing that women, more so than men, felt that COVID-19 will negatively impact on their career prospects.

While we can argue that an inclusive culture insulates people against the impact of change and enables businesses to be more agile and adaptive, we might also reasonably hypothesise that in the face of such an unprecedented set of challenges, people's feelings of inclusion at work might suffer as a result. Again, Catalyst's data suggests that while many believe COVID-19 presents opportunities to introduce more inclusive work practices, employees in general are less confident that their leaders are committed to creating more inclusive workplace cultures.

To capture this monumental shift in work and social life, we extended this year's survey to explore how COVID-19 has impacted on our experiences of inclusion at work. In particular, we were interested in exploring how the impacts of COVID-19 on work life have affected people's sense of inclusion, and their psychological safety.

What is psychological safety and why does it matter?

As we know, inclusion is the key to translating diversity into a performance edge. Creating a sense of inclusion and safety in teams can be difficult in the best of conditions, but the added challenge of having most or all team members working remotely is likely to have had a significant impact on how included people feel.

To leverage the range of perspectives, skills and ideas that a diverse group has, everyone in the room needs to feel included and valued for their difference. One of the key drivers of inclusion in teams is how psychologically safe the team culture feels.
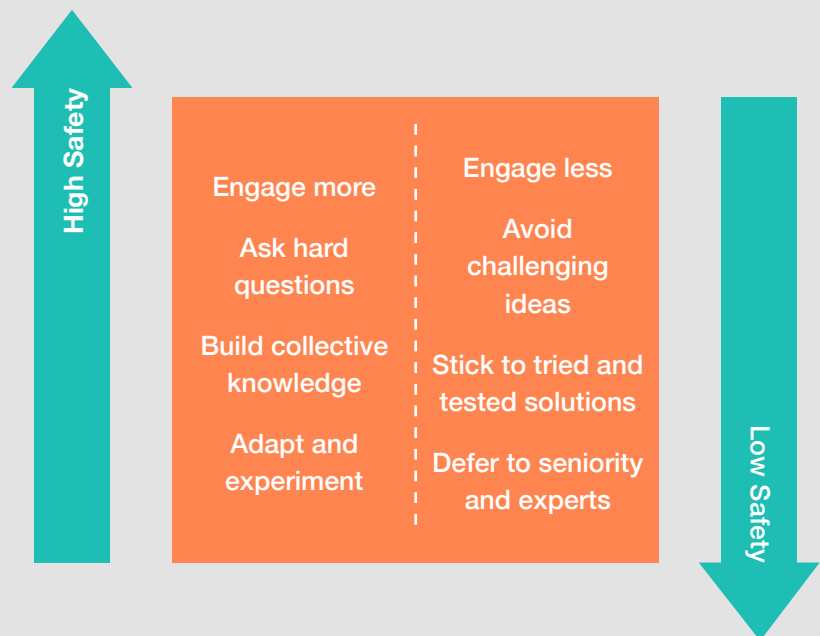
Psychological safety is defined by Amy Edmonson as "the shared belief by team members that the team environment is a safe one in which to take interpersonal risks, to offer new or left-field ideas, and to admit mistakes without fear of humiliation or negative consequences".

It is important to note that psychological safety is not just assumed by the leader or a handful of the more senior or confident team members. The whole team must feel a sense of psychological safety, and the team is only as safe as its least safe team member.

Far from 'playing it safe' psychological safety promotes trust, confidence, curiosity, resilience, perseverance and motivation. It can determine how willing team members are to contribute their full value. Crucially, psychological safety is essential for inclusion.

Anecdotally, we know that remote working can challenge people's sense of psychological safety. Communication is harder in virtual teams, and cohesion can suffer as a result. Without being able to see and chat informally to colleagues and without serendipitous opportunities to bounce ideas around, team members can be left wondering what they might be missing out on, or less clear about their place in their team.

Of course there are additional challenges brought by COVID-19, such as interrupted family and social relationships, financial and job insecurity. Extending the 2020 survey enabled us to explore these impacts.
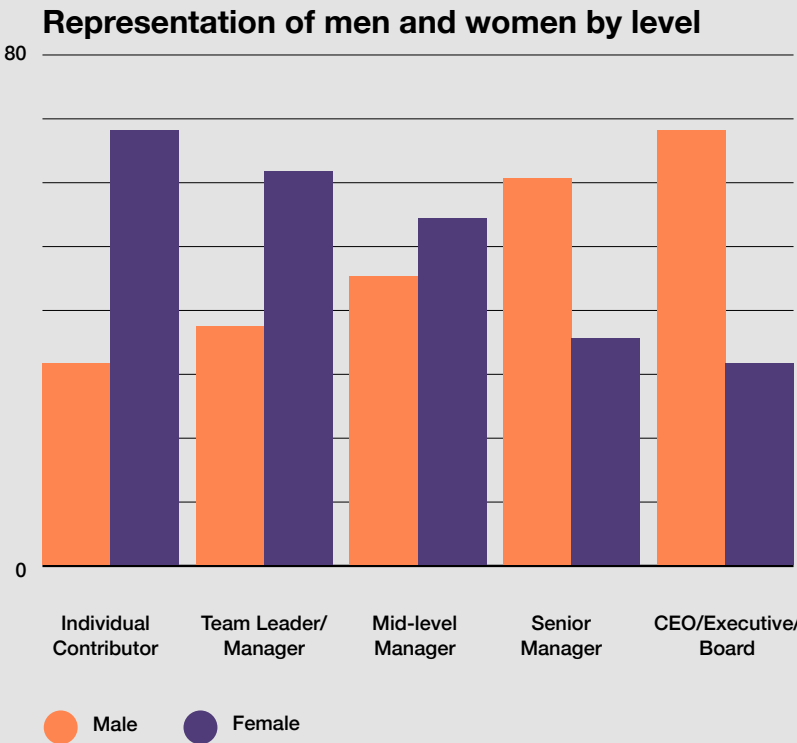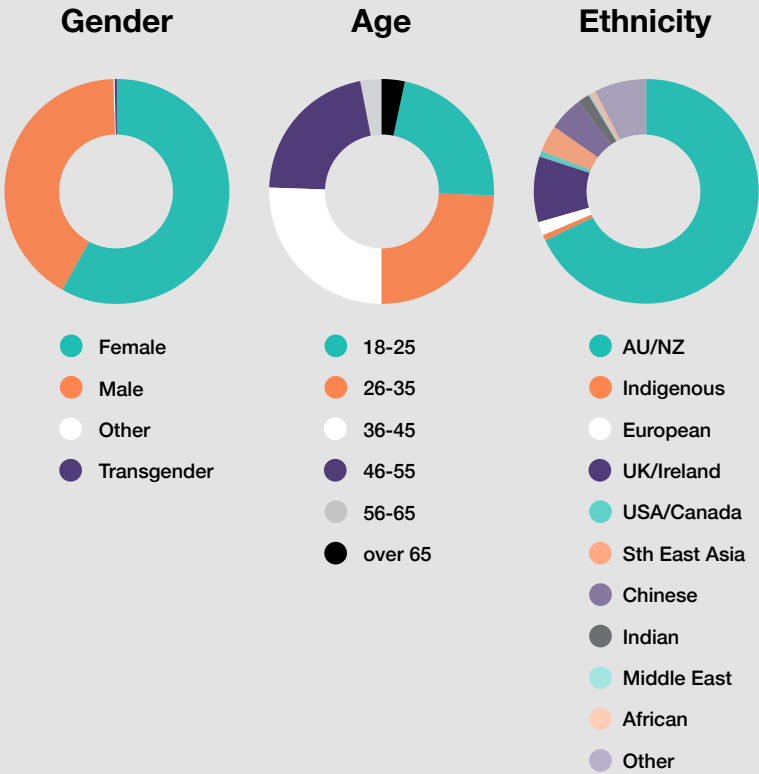

High Safety

Engage more	Engage less
Ask hard questions	Avoid challenging ideas
Build collective knowledge	Stick to tried and tested solutions
Adapt and experiment	Defer to seniority and experts

Low Safety

Psychological safety is defined by Amy Edmonson as "the shared belief by team members that the team environment is a safe one in which to take interpersonal risks, to offer new or left-field ideas, and to admit mistakes without fear of humiliation or negative consequences".

Demographic snapshot

The 2020 survey attracted over 600 respondents across the insurance and risk industry, a sample size comparable to that of the 2019 survey. Women comprised 55% of respondents and 64% of the sample was of Anglo-Australian or New Zealand cultural background. An overwhelming majority of respondents worked full-time (90%), and 40% were parents or carers.

A majority of respondents were individual contributors and again looking at gender representation by level, we can see that women's representation declines with seniority, as was the case with the results from last year's survey.

This persistent "Think Manager, Think Male" dynamic is a pervasive one across organisations in general, both in Australia and globally, and is certainly evident in this sample of the insurance sector. This year's survey results show little change in women's progression into senior roles.

Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Transgender

Age

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- over 65

Ethnicity

- AU/NZ
- Indigenous
- European
- UK/Ireland
- USA/Canada
- Sth East Asia
- Chinese
- Indian
- Middle East
- African
- Other

Representation of men and women by level

80

0

Individual Contributor · Team Leader/Manager · Mid-level Manager · Senior Manager · CEO/Executive/Board

- Male
- Female

Inclusion index

In 2019, the Deep Dive Survey produced an Inclusion Index as a single overall metric on how inclusive people believed their workplace to be. This Index can now act as a baseline measure against which to compare the 2020 survey results, and future surveys going forward.

Averaging these same items with this year's survey sample on a 1-6 scale (where 1 = not at all inclusive and 6 = very inclusive), the Inclusion Index score for 2020 was 3.8, down from last year's score of 4.1

Looking at the frequencies of each response option, we can see that only 37.2% agreed their workplace was inclusive to some degree, and a substantial percentage 62.8% did not. The results indicate a negative trend in feelings of inclusion, compared to last year.

Arguably the massive shift in how and where we work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and accompanying economic and job security concerns, have had a significant negative impact on inclusion.
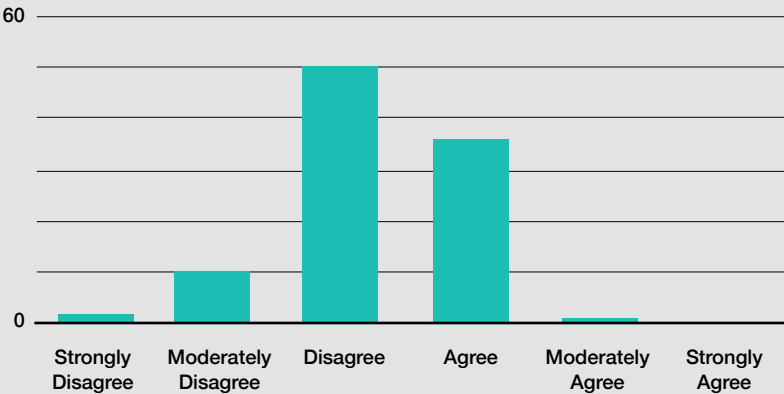
As a key theme of this year's survey, we asked respondents a number of questions relating to the impacts of COVID-19. Over 64% of respondents reported that how and where they work has changed as a result of the pandemic.

We will explore this impact in more detail in a later section of this report. However it is important to note that the overall Inclusion Index does not consider these pandemic-related questions. This means that the reduced levels of inclusion in this year's results are independent of these impacts.

Q: My workplace is inclusive

Response	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	2.4%
Moderately Disagree	10.1%
Disagree	50.3%
Agree	35.8%
Moderately Agree	1.4%
Strongly Agree	0.0%

Inclusion Index

My organisation has appropriate policies and practices for dealing with bullying, harassment and discrimination — **87%** AGREE

Leaders in my organisation are accountable for promoting a diverse, inclusive culture — **84%** AGREE

However

You need to be a certain kind of person to get ahead here — **67%** AGREE

Working part-time or flexibly is a barrier for promotion — **50%** AGREE

As with last year's results, we looked at how the Inclusion Index varied by key demographic factors. Some of the trends identified in last year's results were also evident this year:

- Men (4.0) reported feeling more included than women (3.7).

- Senior managers and executives (4.1) reported feeling more included than individual contributors (3.8).

- People with English as a first language felt slightly more included (3.8) than people for whom English was a second language (3.65).

- People with a disability reported feeling less included (3.6) than those without a disability (3.8).

However, other findings from last year were not evident in this year's results.

- Younger people aged 18-25 reported feeling more included than any other age group, compared to last year where old people felt more included.

- Lesbian and gay respondents reported similar levels of overall inclusion compared to heterosexual respondents.

- There were also no significant differences in overall inclusion by role type (i.e. operational vs. business support) parent/carer status, work status (part-time vs full-time).

About 20% of Australians of working age have a disability.

7%
of respondents disclosed a disability (up from 5.3% in 2019).

About 20% of Australians of working age will experience a mental illness in a given year.

Only about 50% of LGBTQI people are out at work .

4.2%
of respondents identified as lesbian or gay (a slight increase from 3.7% in 2019).

21% of Australians speak a language other than English at home.

13%
of respondents speak English as a second language.

Key themes revisited: gender and age

As with last year's survey, having looked at the overall Inclusion Index by key demographic variables, we then took a closer look at specific item responses.
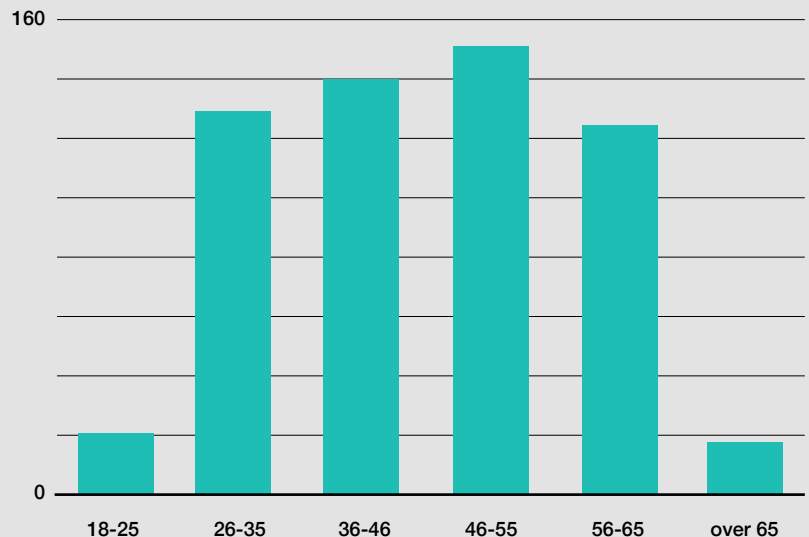
Last year we found that men and women experience different levels of inclusion, with men reporting feeling more included than women. That was also the case this year. Some of the key items driving this difference are detailed below:

- 46% of women were parents/carers compared to 31% of men.

- 65% of support roles were held by women.

- 54% of operational roles were held by women.

- As shown previously women's representation declines with seniority. While women made up 68% of individual contributor roles, they made up only 37% of senior manager roles.

- More women (52%) than men (44%) feel that working flexibly is a barrier to promotion.

- Fewer women (71%) than men (84%) feel that they have the same opportunities for progression as anyone else.

- More men (86%) feel safe to express their views than women (78%).

When it comes to age-related differences in inclusion, results from 2019's survey showed that feelings of inclusion increased with age. That was not the case in this year's results with people aged 18-25 reporting the highest levels of inclusion overall, with an Inclusion Index score of 3.9 compared to 3.65 for those over the age of 65. Few other age-related differences were identified, however, a couple of items revealed notable differences by age group.

- Not surprisingly, people over the age of 55 were less likely to feel that working flexibly was a barrier to progression.

- People aged 26-35 were more likely to believe that you need to be a certain kind of person to get ahead.

Respondents' age

More women (52%) than men (44%) feel that working flexibly is a barrier to promotion.

Fewer women (71%) than men (84%) feel that they have the same opportunities for progression as anyone else.

More men (86%) feel safe to express their views than women (78%).

Key themes revisited: role and leadership

Results from the 2019 survey showed that people working in support functions (including administration, HR, finance, legal and IT) felt more included than those in operational roles (including brokerage/advising, claims, loss adjusting and underwriting).

This year there was no difference in Inclusion Index scores by function, with people working operational and support functions reporting the same level of overall inclusion. Arguably the disruption of COVID-19 has evened out differences the workplace experiences of people in both roles.
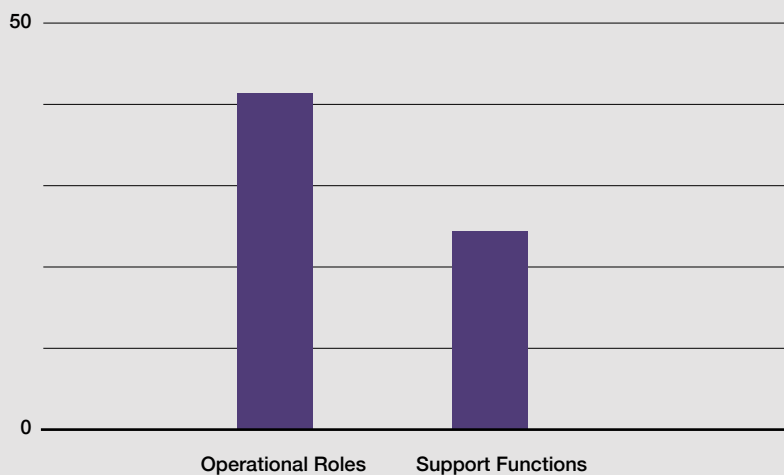
However, In line with 2019's results we did find some differences in overall inclusion by level. Again, leaders felt more included than individual contributors. Specifically senior leaders and executives had higher Inclusion Index scores(4.1) than individuals or team leaders (3.8). Considering the higher representation of men in senior roles, this effect may be related to gender, given that men report higher levels of inclusion than women.

A number of items were particularly revealing in terms of inclusion and leadership:

- Senior leaders and executives were significantly more comfortable being themselves (4.95), compared to individual contributors or team leaders (4.5).

- Individual contributors felt more strongly that you need to be a certain kind of person to get ahead.

Similar to the results from 2019, those with more influence decision-making power and control over the culture, tend to feel more comfortable and included.
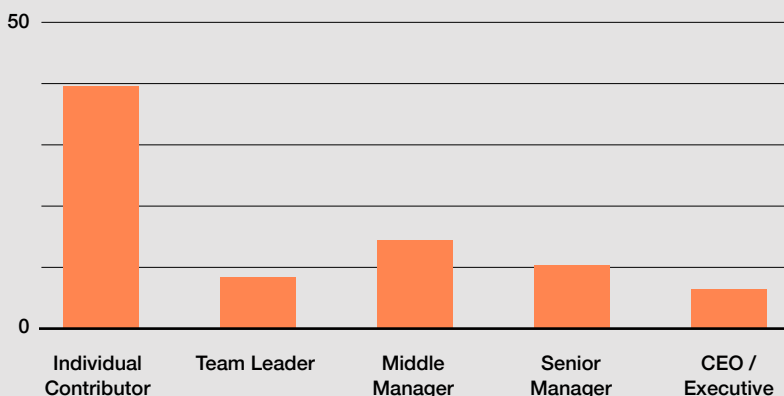
Respondents' role type

Senior leaders and executives were significantly more comfortable being themselves (4.95), compared to individual contributors or team leaders (4.5).

Individual contributors felt more strongly that you need to be a certain kind of person to get ahead.

Respondents' level

Key themes revisited: culture and flexibility

Again the small representation of culturally diverse respondents means that fine-grained analyses of the experiences of culturally diverse people was not possible. Recoding the cultural background item to Anglo-Saxon vs non-Anglo-Saxon respondents is a gross level of simplification, but even so, no notable cultural differences were observed.

In the case of flexibility and parents/carers, 31% of respondents were parents or had carer responsibilities, and 67% of respondents were in full-time roles.
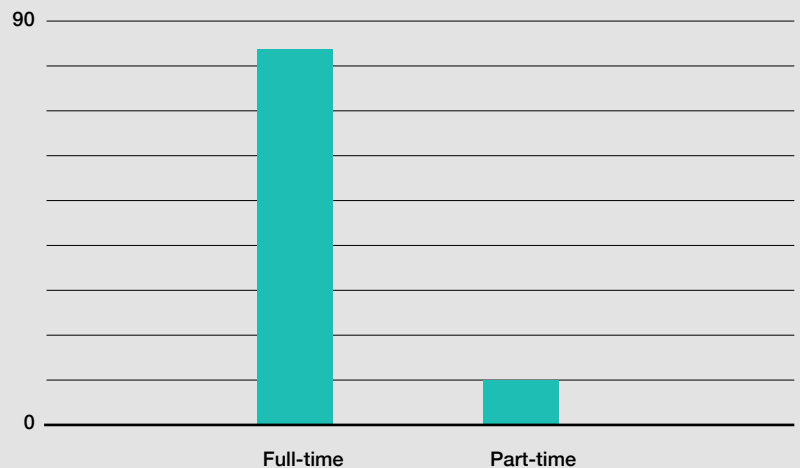
The results from 2019's survey showed that people who have access to flexible work options feel higher levels of inclusion. COVID-19 has brought home and remote work options to many more respondents this year, however. There were no differences in inclusion between people working remotely compared to in the office. People working part-time and full-time experienced similar levels of inclusion, and carers and non-carers were also similar in their overall levels of inclusion.

As we will see in the next section, the impact of COVID-19 is likely to have overshadowed the experiences of many people regarding work/life balance, flexibility and the impact of parental and carer responsibilities.

Looking at individual item differences, however, we found that:

- Parents and people with carer responsibilities are more worried about their place in their team.

- People working remotely or mostly from home are also more worried about their place in their team.

Work status

Parents and people with carer responsibilities are more worried about their place in their team.

People working remotely or mostly from home are also more worried about their place in their team.
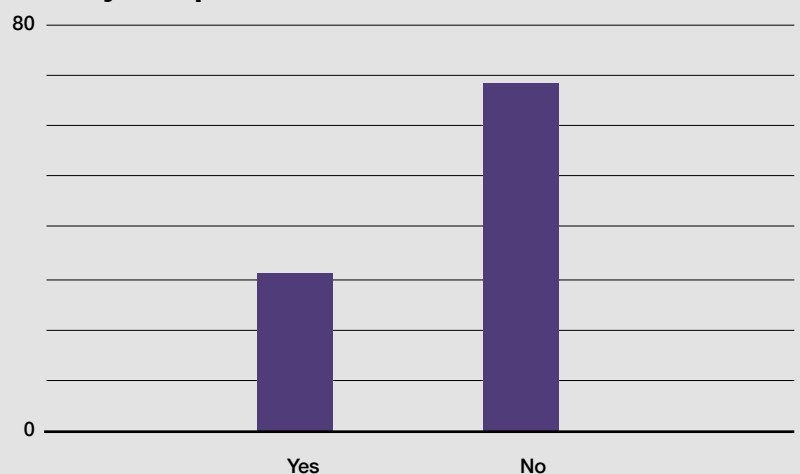
Are you a parent or carer?

The new normal: a COVID-19 world

In an extension of the 2020 survey, we included items relating to the impact of COVID-19 as it is arguably the catalyst for the biggest and most rapid global shift in ways of working this generation will see. We explored the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on how and where people work, and its effect on inclusion and psychological safety.

Over 64% of respondents reported that their work conditions have changed significantly due to COVID-19. Before COVID-19, over 85% of respondents were office-based most or all of the time. Since COVID-19, only 53% of respondents are office-based most or all of the time.
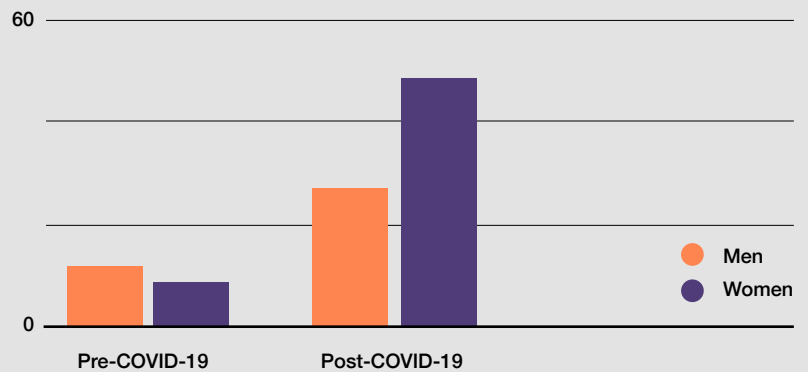
In terms of gender differences, before COVID-19 about 91% of women were office-based. Since COVID-19, only 50% of women are office-based. For men, 88% were office-based before COVID-19, compared to 70% since COVID-19. This indicates that more women than men have moved to working at home or remotely since COVID-19.

75% of respondents reported a negative impact from changes to their work due to COVID-19. Executive and CEO respondents reported a higher negative impact of COVID-19. There were no differences in overall COVID-19 impact by age, cultural background, role (i.e. operational vs business support function) or by carer status.
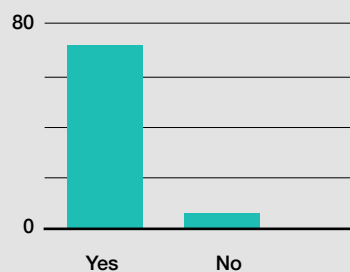
There was no overall gender differences in perceptions of negative COVID-19 impacts, with men and women reporting equal levels of negative impact. However, there were some individual item-level differences.

- Women felt more worried (3.02) about their place in their team compared to men (2.6).

- Women also felt less psychologically safe (4.1) compared to men (4.3).

- Parents and carers, and people working mostly remotely or from home, were more worried about their place in their team compared to those who were mostly office-based.

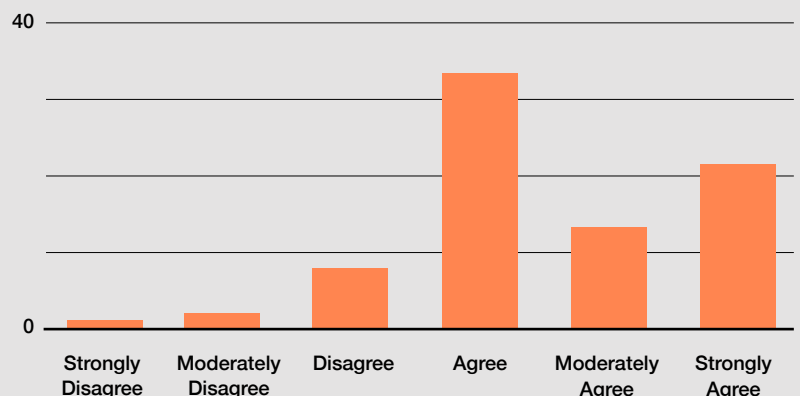## % Respondents working from remotely/home

Is your organisation more likely to be open to flexible work post-COVID-19?

Almost 70% of participants agreed that inclusion was more important than ever in a COVID-19 world.

Inclusion is more important now than ever

We also included a number of open-ended text response questions in this year's survey to get a richer sense of the range of people's experiences through COVID-19.

Predictably, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the way people work. The large-scale move to working remotely, and for most people this means working mostly from home, has had a big impact on people's home life, and on their ability to balance work and home life. There have been a range of challenges, but also some unexpected positive outcomes too.

A selection of responses to each of these items is presented here.

Have there been any unexpected positive impacts on your work during COVID-19?

I speak to my team members more regularly and I am more available to them. They also see that I am a normal person as working from home has allowed them to see me in my own environment.

It has made people seem more 'human', being able to see people in their home context, connecting in new and different ways.

Less travel time and expenses means I have more time and energy to focus on work, and then switch off and enjoy my home life.

COVID-19 has forced my CEO to change his views of working from home. I think he used to question productivity when staff were working from home previously but now it feels as though he trusts us and gives us the freedom to work in a way which best suits us.

It has forced us to look at more efficient ways of doing things and questioning the status quo. It has led to us progressing and implementing changes that we may not have otherwise.

Increased flexibility to encourage mental happiness at work.

More trust from leaders to know that we're still working hard even if we're not in the office, and that we're able to make our own decisions about where and how to carry out our work.

Making sure we keep putting in the effort to keep connections, going the extra mile to make sure you stay in touch with your team.

Being able to see more of the whole person.

How has COVID-19 most impacted on how you work, and how you feel about work?

Surprisingly, the challenges that came along with working from home really pushed me to work more efficiently and effectively and also encouraged me to rely on my own abilities and skills. As a part-time working mum I always felt that working from home was not as productive and that I had to be in the office long and late to show people that I was actually committed and working hard. But this experience has shown me is that I am actually more productive and am able to get more work done and that working from home can work really well if you have good systems, technology and discipline. I am not scared about what other people will think of me now if I choose to adopt some more flexible working arrangements because I know it doesn't reflect on my commitment and work ethic.

It has been very isolating. It feels a little lonely in the office and glum. I miss the old days of being with my team, however, I have a lot of resilience and draw on that.

More hours in the day without travel, although that tends to mean I work longer hours and there's fewer boundaries between work and life.

I am working in a much quieter environment at home which enables me to be far more productive and focused. I churn through things at home whereas previously in the office, I would have been interrupted a lot more just by being in the office. Achieving more day to day gives me a far more positive feeling that I am really contributing to the larger firm goals.

This has positively impacted the culture of the firm by removing the stigma associated with people who worked from home in the past not actually working.

Sense of isolation has been significant, this has either made me work harder or struggle to be motivated.

The rapid change from full-time work in the office to working from home was initially quite daunting however as the months have gone on it has certainly become easier to adjust. Right now I am feeling quite positive about work.

I feel like I enjoy work a lot more. Also I'm less anxious knowing I'm not 1.5 hours away if family members need me. I also feel like I can be more organised with my assigned tasks.

How has working from home affected your feeling of inclusion and connectedness with your colleagues?

Remaining motivated and being able to maintain a separation from my home life and work life without feeling like I am constantly in work mode.

It's been really challenging as we no longer have the ability to bounce ideas off each other spontaneously. Sure, we can do it by calling or videoing, but it's not quite the same. I live with my family and we support each other. I think it would be so much harder if I was living on my own.

What have been the practical biggest challenges for you in working from home?

No 'office hours' so its more difficult to manage work/life balance.

Trying to home school and work at the same time is even harder than the work/life juggle was while I was office-based.

Being left out of the loop on news, perhaps not hearing as much about what is going on at management level. Informal conversations not happening as often.

Having enough space - I don't have a spare room so I work from a desk set up in the bedroom. I think I would feel better about working from home if I had a space dedicated solely to this.

Inclusion is more important now than ever

The business case for diversity and inclusion is stronger than ever. While COVID-19 has left many organisations in 'crisis mode', there is good reason to believe that inclusion is more important now than ever. We know that an inclusive culture fosters greater engagement and well-being for employees. It also unleashes greater levels of innovation, resilience, creativity and agility – all factors that are essential to any organisation adapting to unprecedented levels of disruption and uncertainty. Continuing to dedicate time and effort to growing a more inclusive culture has never been so important, a view shared by an overwhelming majority of this year's survey respondents.

The results of this year's survey provide a unique insight into how a global crisis is impacting on employees' experiences. Feelings of inclusion are lower this year overall compared to last year's results. Given the impact of COVID-19 this is unsurprising. However, in line with last year's results we also found that:

- Women feel less included at work than men, they were also more likely to feel that flexible work is a challenge to progression, less safe expressing their views, and that they have fewer opportunities for promotion. Gender is still a key challenge for inclusion.

- Senior leaders feel more included than individuals or team leaders.

- People with English as a second language, and people with a disability feel less included.

- There was again strong agreement with the idea that you need to be "a certain kind of person to get ahead".

These challenges remain ongoing when it comes to building a more inclusive culture, regardless of the external context. Organisations should rightly continue to invest in building capability around inclusive leadership, reducing biases in recruitment and promotion, and in setting targets for key diversity and inclusion metrics.

When we look at the impact of COVID-19, we see that a sizeable majority of people reported that their work conditions have changed substantially. For most people that has meant working mostly or entirely from home. Three-quarters of respondents reported that these changes had an overall negative impact. This was especially so for women, who also reported more negative impacts, particularly in terms of psychological safety. Hearteningly, over 70% of people believed inclusion was more important now than ever, and responses to the open-ended questions revealed a number of unexpected positive outcomes due to COVID-19.

The key challenge posed by COVID-19 for most organisations has been adapting how and where people perform their work. Flexible work has long been a central topic in diversity and inclusion work, as it is a key enabler for the fuller participation of women (who are still more likely than men to be primary carers) and other people with caring responsibilities.

Until recently, many organisations have continued to be challenged by the notion of mainstream flexible work arrangements. Reimagining role descriptions, working hours, and conditions has been easier in some roles than in others, and in some industries than others. Yet still, until recently, working flexibly has been a case of "nice if you can get it", rather than a normal way of working.

COVID-19 has re-written the rules on this front and many organisations have surprised both themselves and their employees with just how quickly and effectively they have been able to facilitate most employees working remotely when they have to. This year's survey gives us a vital first look at the impact of this rapid 'mainstreaming' of flexible work across the industry, albeit with the additional complications of doing so under 'crisis conditions'.

The results reveal some predictable challenges and some surprising positive outcomes, particularly when we look at the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions we posed to respondents. While most respondents felt that the impact of COVID-19 had been negative overall, the ability to work from home was largely seen as a positive outcome, with some important qualifications. Largely, working remotely provided reduced costs and time commuting to and from work, greater freedom and autonomy to self-schedule, and greater perceived trust from leaders. In addition, comments revealed that working from home also provided the quiet, uninterrupted space to do thinking and reflective work, which is increasingly difficult to do in open-plan and hot-desk office environments. However a number of negative impacts were evident:

- Working from home assumes that the requisite technical facilities are available, which is not always the case. Even where this is the case, many people do not have a dedicated work space in their home. For some the challenge of working in the midst of a busy home life was substantial.

- For women in particular, bearing most of the home-schooling responsibilities while working from home is particularly challenging.

- Many respondents noted difficulties with drawing boundaries between work life and home life, taking more meetings on evenings and weekends than they would otherwise. The expectation to be 'always on' was higher.

- Finally, and most notably, respondents felt a reduction in team connectedness and cohesion, and a sense of insecurity about their place in their team. Arguably this latter finding is more related to the uncertainties brought by COVID-19 than by remote working per se. Nonetheless, it is an important consideration as most respondents hoped working from home would continue to be normative after COVID-19 ceases to impact on work life.

Inclusive teams are psychologically safe teams

We frequently think of inclusion as the 'glue' that maintains cohesion in diverse teams. That being the case, psychological safety is a key ingredient in this glue. Creating a sense of connection and belonging is even more important during times of crisis, and when teams are working remotely.

Many of the impacts of COVID-19 appear to be COVID-19 specific, rather than flexible work-related. Given that a large majority of respondents hoped that flexible work would continue post-COVID-19, it might serve us well to consider how virtual teams can maintain psychological safety and inclusion but still facilitate the freedom and autonomy that working from home can bring.

Most of us retreat to safety and become more conservative in a crisis. Paradoxically, this renders us less capable of creatively solving the problems it brings. To maintain inclusion and psychological safety in virtual teams, and certainly during times of crisis, consider these tips and tools.

Finally, for leaders and teams, courage is essential to successfully navigating difficult times. While we may be feeling a degree of 'crisis-fatigue', remember that courage is also essential for inclusion. Focus on what's important, allow yourself and your team to experiment, make some mistakes, keep looking for solutions, and focus on what keeps you together.

➡ Cultivate the twin mindsets of humility and curiosity. We know that psychologically safe teams are comfortable admitting mistakes, they learn from failure, they share ideas more openly, and they make more robust and innovative ideas. Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. Listen without judging, and ask, don't assume.

➡ Do continue to be cognisant of the impact of unconscious biases on our thinking and decision-making. Remember bias is more likely when we're stressed and in uncertain times. Sense check your thinking and decision-making for bias, ask a colleague to help hold you accountable.

➡ For leaders, we often talk about the importance of perspective-switching when it comes to inclusion – to put yourself in the shoes of your least included team member. Psychological safety is no different – make sure you understand the challenges and needs of every team member when it comes to working remotely.

➡ Use web-based and collaboration tools to broaden your network of confidants and familiars, make an extra effort to build new relationships with people you might not know that well.

➡ Take time to check that everyone in online meetings can contribute, capitalise on chat functions to elicit input from the quieter voices. Expressly welcome new ideas and curious questions.

➡ Communicate clearly and often, more often than usual. Without line of sight and spontaneous opportunities to chat and interact with people, team members risk feeling "out of the loop". This generates insecurity and disengagement.

➡ Shift your mindset – more than ever you will be measured on your outputs, not your hours. Take the initiative to choose how to schedule your time for optimal productivity. You have more freedom than before, but also more responsibility for your work.

➡ Do set boundaries. Working from home should not mean 'always on'. Make sure your colleagues have reasonable expectations of your availability.

Conclusions

The first Deep Dive on Inclusion in 2019 revealed a number of key priorities for organisations committed to better leveraging the power of difference. In particular, the survey highlighted gender, leadership, and generational diversity as priority areas.

The replication and extension of the survey in 2020 has enabled us to begin to monitor changes over time which is a vital metric for any organisation seeking to understand the value of its investment in workplace culture. While we are unlikely to look back on 2020 as a typical year by any measure, the ability to track inclusion over time, and to understand inclusion regarding shifts in work practices, business and social contexts is invaluable.

While inclusion levels have dropped somewhat according to this year's results, the impacts of COVID-19 have been monumental, not just in terms of work, but in day-to-day life more broadly. Many of the negative impacts of mainstream remote working will be alleviated as the global pandemic is brought under control and we normalise the changes it has caused. We are perhaps more agile and resilient than we realised.

There are two key messages emerging from this 2020 survey. First, mainstreamed flexible work can work when the right technical, structural and leadership support is in place. Second, inclusion plays a vital role in ensuring that people feel connected, engaged and psychologically safe no matter where and how they work.

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Inclusion and diversity are at risk in the crisis – but are critical for business recovery, resilience and reimagination.

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Author bio

Jennifer is the founding director of Psynapse Psychometrics. A former Research Fellow at the Melbourne Business School and the University of Melbourne, Jennifer is a recognised academic expert and organisational consultant specialising in diversity and inclusive leadership, unconscious bias, decision-making, and innovation.

Jennifer founded Psynapse in 2010 with the goal of bringing innovative cognitive science research out of the laboratory, and into the world of practical solutions to organisational problems. A central passion for her work is helping organisations and leaders to leverage diversity and inclusion to drive innovation and organisational performance.

Jennifer is an active thought leader and a regular contributor to industry forums, events, and public debate, including contributions to The Conversation and The Age; and engagements with The Sydney Opera House, The Committee for Economic Development of Australia, The Australian Human Resources Institute, and The Diversity Council of Australia.

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