



Hybrid participation options to mitigate discrimination and maximise productivity in post-COVID higher education and research workplaces

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The global COVID-19 pandemic has changed the working landscape and introduced new, not yet recognized workplace inclusion and discrimination issues.

Mitigating strategies to reduce the spread of the disease has necessitated widespread uptake of remote meeting and collaboration technologies [1]. As people return to campuses, we now find ourselves faced with a new potential form of discrimination based around preferences for in-person or remote work including meeting attendance.

Many people have found remote working, e.g. working from home to be more productive for many aspects of research, teaching and administration. This means that many people will strongly prefer to continue working from home and maximize the benefits of remote meeting and communication technologies for a range of work-related activities. Others will continue to prefer on-campus and in-person work activities. Some people may prefer continuing with digital meeting participation even if physically present on campus. In these circumstances the potential for exclusion and even discrimination based on work location and participation preferences arises.

We suggest that all activities that can be carried both remotely and in person should be conducted in the hybrid mode. The goal is to boost productivity while providing participation options that suit everyone. This approach should be effective in many situations beyond common research and group meetings, project discussions, and collaborative work,

and will include retreats, workshops and other networking events.

This hybrid approach will open further opportunities for disabled entry to many work environments, particularly where remote digital interactions provide advantages e.g. for people with mobility, hearing, sight impairment and mental health conditions.

Going with either/or options will leave some participants feeling excluded and or provide sub-optimal working environment for all participants leading to the inevitable loss of productivity and morale. Therefore, the exclusive use of one type of format may lead to a new and not yet recognized form of workplace discrimination.

The new normal for work environments in higher education and research institutes should be based on hybrid meeting, collaboration, and other work-related activities that enable participation remotely and in-person to account for individual circumstances, yet maximise workplace productivity.

References

1. Langin K (2021) As U.S. pandemic subsides, conferences explore 'hybrids'. *Science* 372:673–674

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