

## Step-changing D&I during the COVID-19 crisis

Report on the virtual workshop held 4 May 2020

The COVID-19 crisis is having a huge impact on every organisation. Topics like supply-chain security, workforce planning, business continuity, health and safety, and of course profit protection are dominating boardroom conversations. But where does this leave the diversity and inclusion agenda that we've all been working so hard on for the past few years?

On 4 May 2020, LEAD Network's Education Committee brought together D&I leaders in a virtual workshop, to explore the challenges and learnings generated by the crisis. There were 12 participants from across our Partner network. Together, we shared ideas about ways to maintain the progress we have already made towards gender equality in our industry, discussed what we are learning about inclusion during this time, and considered how the crisis might be used to build a more dynamic, purposeful and inclusive future.

We had already hosted a virtual CEO Roundtable a few days earlier, covering similar topics. There was a lot of common ground between the findings, suggesting fruitful areas for future collaboration and debate.

### Key takeaways

- The risks of the pandemic are greater for women: they tend to bear the brunt of additional caring and home-schooling responsibilities during lockdown, and are more likely to be in frontline, low-paid or vulnerable jobs. Due to remote working, men are becoming more aware of these pressures.
- Virtual working is opening companies' eyes to new possibilities. Many are crafting new inclusive practices such as newsletters, surveys, leader interactions, and support on issues such as mental health and domestic violence.
- Post-pandemic, our industry has the chance to build a new conversation on inclusivity, and embed flexible practices that have been developed during this extraordinary period.

During the workshop, our participants generated scores of insights, which you will find listed below. There is also an appeal for your ideas for LEAD Network's virtual conference 2020, which takes place in October.

We hope you find this report a useful tool as you continue to manage and motivate your teams during these difficult times.

### What are the key D&I challenges of the current crisis?

- During the first few weeks of the pandemic, all attention was focused on operational and business continuity rather than on inclusion. Many important D&I events were postponed.
- Women are more severely affected by the COVID-19 situation. Many are bearing the brunt of caring for elderly or sick relatives, looking after young children and home schooling. This is more visible in some markets than others. These additional responsibilities may affect

women's performance (or other people's perception of it), as well as putting a strain on women's mental health and wellbeing.

- In some countries, such as Russia and Turkey, there has been hesitation about shifting to remote working.
- Some organisations are not geared up for remote working due to lack of practice or infrastructure (employees not having laptops, VPNs, etc). These companies may need to put more focus on supporting employees to have a safe and productive working environment.
- Remote working can make it harder to form diverse teams.
- As the situation unfolds, employers face the challenge of keeping staff motivated and preventing burnout.
- Longer term, women may be more likely to lose their jobs in restructures/redundancies, due to the nature of the roles they perform or a perceived need to favour people who don't require flexible working.
- There are also questions about how to handle performance management conversations within organisations. There is awareness that people may not be able to contribute in the same way as before if they are having to juggle work and caring responsibilities. HR teams must provide guidance to managers about how to continue to drive and reward performance while also being mindful of barriers.

## How are companies responding?

- Most believe that D&I is still a key focus for business – there is no perception of reduced importance, despite the extreme pressure being applied by the crisis.
- Companies are having to consider which of their employees can and can't work from home, and to find creative ways to support and protect them.
- There is a mass shift to remote working. Virtual meetings create authenticity and a more rounded sense of employees' lives, with children, pets and homes all being part of the picture.
- Leaders are getting to know their teams better and are listening more. They are asking employees what help they need and are creating solutions such as mental health webinars; inclusive leadership initiatives; new networks and circles to connect people; and action on xenophobia.
- Companies are trying to ensure remote employees have a sense of purpose and belonging. This is driving a more holistic view of D&I, with a genuine concern for people's wellbeing and a focus on the whole employee and their personal circumstances.
- Many organisations are running surveys to assess employees' satisfaction, monitor shifts in motivation, track emerging trends etc. These surveys are tending to reveal a change in the things employees are worried about as time progresses.
- Mental health support is critical. Some companies are building support systems for mothers and employing domestic-violence consultants.
- New mechanisms are being put in place to communicate with each other and share best practice, for example, a 'people's portal' and a newsletter to share the experience of working from home.

- Storytelling is becoming a powerful tool. The current situation is proving to be a great source of personal stories from leaders and employees, which are contributing to messages about inclusion and helping to create a sense of belonging.
- Some businesses are continuing to hire, and report being able to find excellent talent.
- Decisions are being made more quickly and there is less red tape, which assists D&I activities as well as other business areas.

## What are the opportunities for the future?

- There is a sense that the crisis, while enormously difficult, may have many long-term benefits in breaking down old barriers and hierarchies. Our participants felt they didn't want this opportunity to go to waste, but instead to learn lessons and build a more inclusive environment for everyone.
- Because men are working from home, they are gaining fresh insights into the challenges faced by working women in juggling domestic and professional commitments. This could shift men's attitudes to their partners and colleagues, and create an opening to involve more men in D&I in the coming months and years.
- Businesses have been forced to experiment with new working patterns and technologies. Travel and being present in the office will no longer be seen as a critical factor for success.
- Senior leaders have now experienced flexible working at first hand (and seen that it works well), and myths have been busted about the ability of many roles to be done flexibly. This gives women the chance to access areas that have been male-dominated in the past.
- There is an opportunity for companies to tackle the discussion of mobility as part of career development, which is often a barrier for women. They should also create more part-time leadership positions, to drive a better gender balance.
- Because companies may be recruiting less, there may be more scope to focus on developing female talent within the organisation.
- People are growing used to having more contact with and access to the leadership team, and this may build more dialogue and inclusion in future.
- D&I may need to evolve: programs become virtual; local events become regional or global. This could improve access and inclusion for those who were previously unable to participate.
- Organisations should capture learnings about different ways of working from their people. They should reflect on how they want to evolve as a company.
- The move to more empathetic and inclusive leadership must be continued after the crisis ends.
- There should be more exchange of ideas and best practice between regions, thanks to adoption of virtual platforms and more awareness of the benefits of collaboration.

## Next steps

We want to continue the conversation with all of you. As part of the survey at the end of the session, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that the session was valuable and should be continued on a bi-monthly basis. We will be sending out invitations for future events shortly.



Leading Executives Advancing Diversity

The LEAD Network virtual conference, to be held on 6-8 October 2020, will also provide a great opportunity for companies to share, learn and engage with each other. If you have a topic that you'd like to showcase, please contact Christina Taylor [christina@learntogrow.co.uk](mailto:christina@learntogrow.co.uk).