

TOOL 1.16

Supporting Gender Equity in Virtual Workplaces

- » **GOAL:** Help HR teams support parents working from home
- » **TARGET UNIT:** Human Resources

During the COVID-19 pandemic, families around the world have faced unprecedented challenges balancing work and childcare. With schools closed and parents working from home, research consistently shows that while there are increasing demands on both mothers and fathers, mothers are taking on even greater workloads in the home. According to UN Women, “the average woman now spends nearly the equivalent of a full-time job doing unpaid childcare—a full working day a week more than the average man.”¹⁰⁶ This means that women, and mothers particularly, are now trying to balance work against an unprecedented amount of domestic labor. As a result, women are “more than twice as likely as fathers to worry that their performance is being judged negatively because of caregiving responsibilities.”¹⁰⁷

The pandemic has driven 400,000 more women than men out of the U.S. workforce.¹⁰⁸ But for those women who stay in the workforce, and the employers who want and are able to keep them, adapting to the new situation by supporting women particularly to be as productive as possible will be critical.

Beyond the drastically increasing workload in terms of housework and childcare that have become hallmarks of the pandemic for women, a number of challenges are emerging that impact mothers in terms of their ability to work from home. This tool looks at the particular challenges that are emerging around women’s work from home and provides recommendations to managers on how to mitigate these negative effects and support women’s productivity in the virtual workplace.

Among the specific challenges:

Challenges to create a virtual workplace: Women are more likely to be working at the kitchen table, while men are more likely to be working in the home office. Working from a home office makes it easier to focus and harder to be interrupted. Mothers are 50% more likely than fathers to be interrupted by children while working remotely, creating serious challenges to concentration, productivity, and the ability to have calls and meetings.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Alex Thornton, [COVID-19: How Women are Bearing the Burden of Unpaid Work](#), World Economic Forum 2020.

¹⁰⁷ McKinsey & Co and Lean In, [Women in The Workplace 2020](#), 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Kweilind Ellingrund and Liz Hilton Segel, [COVID-19 Has Driven Millions of Women out of the Workforce. Here’s How to Help them Come Back](#), Fortune.com, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Alison Andrew, Sarah Cattan, Monica Costa Dias, et al., [“How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?”](#) Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020.

Challenges participating: Women are more likely to be talked over in virtual meetings (and in live meetings) than men.¹¹⁰ As noted in previous tools, women are already less likely to be given credit for their work, and their accomplishments are more likely to be devalued. Virtual meetings make it even more challenging for women to gain recognition, which can have an impact on future upgrades and promotions.

Challenges in being seen: With so many meetings moving to online video platforms, many employers encourage or pressure employees to use the camera to create more of an ‘in-person’ feel. However, research shows that women are typically judged more harshly than men for their appearance in virtual (and in-person) meetings, especially women of color and particularly Black women. The pressure to turn on the camera therefore carries with it an extra burden for women, who are then subject to biases based on their appearance.¹¹¹

For parents with small children, there is often a fear that having children appear in the video frame will be perceived as unprofessional. Since women are 50% more likely to be interrupted by children while working from home, they bear this risk more substantially than fathers.¹¹²

Challenges in time management: When parents must juggle home school and childcare with work, many have to work more flexible hours—for instance, taking time off during the day and working more in the evenings after children have been put to bed. Rigid company operating hours create a significant challenge for parents who need increased flexibility to manage competing obligations.

Challenges for fathers, but opportunities for all: The COVID-19 pandemic may be shifting domestic tasks more equitably within the household. Fathers may now have the opportunity to play a more active role, even in families where there was a more traditional gender division of labor when the father worked outside the home. A positive externality of the crisis may be that not only are household tasks more evenly divided, but also that fathers request the required flexibility from their jobs as a result. Employers will need to reflect this new division of labor in the type of availability they expect and the flexibility that they provide to employees with families.¹¹³

How employers can adapt to the challenges of working from home to support gender equity:

- Create more flexible work options, including options to work from home, reduce or adjust hours, and/or take unpaid leave.
- Wherever possible, and as much as possible, provide staff clarity and certainty. For mothers, and particularly those who are taking on an outside role in childcare

¹¹⁰ Alisha Haridasani Gupta, [“It’s Not Just You: In Online Meetings, Many Women Can’t Get a Word In.”](#) New York Times, April 14, 2020.

¹¹¹ Allison S. Gabriel, Daron Robertson, and Kristen Shockley, [“Research: Cameras On or Off?”](#) Harvard Business Review, Oct 2021.

¹¹² Alison Andrew, Sarah Cattan, Monica Costa Dias, et al., [“How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?”](#) Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020.

¹¹³ Ibid.

during the pandemic, uncertainty about job performance and security can take a serious mental health toll. Employers which communicate clearly about performance, expectations, flexibility, and timelines (for instance, the earliest anticipated date for a return to the office) can help employees plan and manage their own expectations.¹¹⁴

- Give guidance to managers on how to support staff working from home. Outline flexible work options that are available to staff and communicate proactively to foster understanding of options for managing these challenging situations.
- Create employee resource groups to enable staff to share experiences, tips, and resources for managing this challenging period. Support can range from connecting employees who are experiencing the same challenges with other employees in the same situation to sharing online resources for keeping kids entertained. A parents' group at LinkedIn became a global forum for parents, including sharing online scavenger hunts, providing tutoring between staff and children, and sharing other resources. These groups can improve morale, strengthen connections among employees, and help parents connect with others in the same situation.¹¹⁵
- Provide support for improved internet connections as needed. Many parents will be juggling working from home with online schooling at the same time, so they may need improved bandwidth to continue performing.
- Provide support for creating a more effective home office. For parents with children at home, it may be even more important to create a separate home office space. For mothers who are even more likely to be interrupted by children, this can lead to big gains in productivity.¹¹⁶
- Survey parents on the type of support they need. Asking can not only enable you as the employer to support your employees to be as productive as possible, but can also demonstrate support during these unprecedented times.¹¹⁷
- Take inspiration from companies like Vox Media, which has taken to hosting online 'virtual storytimes,' including one hosted by the CEO, to entertain employees' children during the workday.¹¹⁸
- Consider schedules that explicitly support working parents. Companies such as Skyscanner created a three-hour break for all employees in the middle of the day, including supporting parents to take care of their children during this period.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Dana Sumpter and Mona Zanhour, [3 Ways Companies can Retain Working Moms Right Now](#), Harvard Business Review, November 2020.

¹¹⁵ Samantha McLaren, [6 Ways Companies are Supporting Parents Working from Home](#), LinkedIn, August 2020.

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Baskin, [Five Ways Companies Can Help Mothers Struggling with Remote Work](#), Forbes, March 2021.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Samantha McLaren, [6 Ways Companies are Supporting Parents Working from Home](#), LinkedIn, August 2020.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.