

The 8 lessons learned from the pandemic

The global pandemic had a negative impact on the lives of people from the University of Amsterdam in many ways, but we want to highlight the other, positive impact that has also been experienced by some of us - especially those with disabilities and chronic conditions, for whom working from home meant removal of barriers and increased accessibility.

The new Disability Working Group of the FNWI Faculty Diversity Office's Sounding Board organized a discussion with students and employees about which positive changes were experienced during the pandemic. We believe these experiences may guide our faculty towards more inclusive practices and culture in a time of continuing uncertainties.

We would like to share 8 lessons we can learn from the pandemic:

1. **The pandemic has shown us that more freedom and flexibility to create personal working routines benefit people.** Trusting each other is both necessary and appropriate: motivation, productivity or social cohesion should not be equated with being physically present.

E.g., a hybrid workplace, where employees have flexibility to choose whether they want to work in office or remotely, can improve productivity while promoting a better work-life balance, with less commuting. Working from home allows people with certain conditions to take a brief rest during the day, which is difficult on campus. Moreover, some people experience better focus when they work from home.

2. **We should maintain a hybrid environment as much as possible (for teaching/learning, supervising, group meetings and conferencing).**

E.g., people with disabilities and chronic conditions are often at higher risk for COVID-19 (and other diseases), which influences their risk-benefit analysis of attending in-person meetings. Besides, online meetings and conferences are more accessible for people who have visual or auditory disabilities or use a wheelchair. It remains important to keep up the pace of improving (physical) accessibility (following the UvA Beleid Personen met Functiebeperking, 2016), yet maintaining a hybrid environment as standard practice should be considered in line with that goal.

3. **For teachers, lecturers and supervisors, it is recommended to share all materials digitally, so people can use their equipment and assistive devices. Make sure that the materials are adjusted as much as possible to people with special needs.**

E.g. making sure that Powerpoint-slides are readable for the colorblind, that texts are fit for text-to-speech tools, to read/listen to it.

4. **Technical support and help using digital tools should routinely be offered to teachers** to create a hybrid environment together.

E.g., teachers who are unfamiliar with the technicalities of recording lectures or OWLs, should be offered the option to get help setting up the equipment when reserving lecture rooms or tools. Besides information on Canvas, workshops on inclusive digital teaching should be offered regularly to staff.

- 5. It should be a standard procedure to openly discuss the diverse needs and preferences at work when organizing meetings, seminars etc., realizing that there can be challenges to accommodate everyone.**

E.g., the pandemic experiences have shown how specific needs are sometimes difficult to reconcile: a deaf colleague might need to see the faces in a Zoom meeting for lip reading, while another colleague might need to avoid visual stimuli, preventing overstimulation. It is therefore recommended that all students and workers are encouraged to discuss their individual needs and the options of facilities and support.

- 6. We should keep having conversations about mental health, and make sure nobody misses out on the chance to get support.** The pandemic made us more aware of the importance of mental health and of sharing our personal struggles.

E.g., the pandemic laid bare that not only those with recognized special needs are repeatedly struggling to accommodate their health and/or family conditions in their professional / student life. Keeping silent on such matters has proven not to be sustainable, forcing us to recognize the need for open conversations about these.

- 7. It is important to make time for social interaction, both virtually and physically, to stay connected.** The university can help by organizing hybrid social events, promoting coffee breaks and “small talks” at the start of (zoom) meetings.

- 8. The pandemic has shown us how we can and should shift our culture** to view disability and chronic conditions not as “problems” that have to be solved, but as conditions that are an integral part of the community, and that require the university to be proactive in removing barriers. Being proactive means asking what needs there are and what could be improved.

In fact, this ‘new normal’ not only applies to those with disabilities and/or chronic conditions, but to everybody, as we experience ever-changing health conditions.

These 8 lessons are not only relevant for people with disabilities or chronic conditions: everyone can benefit from digital access or flexible working hours. These simple measures would also benefit anyone facing short-term injuries, pregnancy, overtiredness or when their child gets sick. Furthermore, it reduces travel time and transit, which is good for the environment. We believe that these lessons will make the University of Amsterdam a more inclusive, accessible and healthy working environment, where everyone can work and study under the best circumstances, and feel welcome!

Rethinking the atmosphere we want to create at our campus is important for everybody, what do you think? Contact us via diversity-science@uva.nl (cc n.h.witteveen@uva.nl)!

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