

Working Remotely: How to Support Employees with Intellectual Disabilities

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The Employee Perspective: Mei Lin Yap, HR Assistant, Cpl

A month ago, I had it all. Going to work in Cpl as part of Group HR every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. ([You can read about Mei Lin's journey to reach employment as a woman with a disability here.](#))

As a member of the Irish Down Syndrome Sporting Organisation I had been selected to compete in the World Down Syndrome Swimming Championships in Turkey, which was due to be held in April 2020. I was busy training in the National Aquatic Centre at 6 am before work twice a week and swimming with Dublin Swimming Club after work. All training stopped and the world event was postponed.

I was also going out to IDS-TILDA whenever I was asked to be involved in the work that they do. Then in my spare time, spending time with my friends and going for walks with my dog Murphy.

Helping Seanad Candidate Hugo MacNeill with his campaign trail and being involved with the great work that [Open Doors](#) do, as well as being involved with Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities.

Life during the COVID-19 pandemic

Now due to COVID-19, I'm working remotely. I have a new routine and am trying to keep healthy and fit. I am enjoying being at home, getting up before work and doing my workouts online with Joe Wicks, having my breakfast and coffee and starting my working day. I find having this routine helpful.

I'm helping my mum with various things, giving her tea in bed in the mornings and finding things to do at home. Helping with the cooking, cleaning the house, baking, gardening and walking my dog Murphy. (And of course, enjoying watching Netflix.)

I miss spending time with my brother and my future sister in law a lot, both now living in Cork. Unfortunately, their August wedding may now have to be postponed. For now, I feel lucky to be able to connect with family by telephone and by Zoom.

I'm also noticing more than ever the importance of friendships in and outside of work and the value of family. Having friends, staying connected and feeling included is so important.

Working remotely challenges

What I find challenging right now is using my laptop, whereas normally in the office I'd have two screens. This can be a bit of a challenge when I am working on something*.

It is very different, but I reckon I can manage using my laptop for as long as I need to. **Cpl are looking into this feedback and are looking into alternative accommodations for Mei Lin.)*

It can be a struggle to keep healthy and fit, making sure I have the right portion sizes and keeping an eye on snacking. It is very hard not having any face to face interaction and I find that very strange. It's nice when I do have that interaction with my team via video on Microsoft Teams.

I also feel more included thanks to [Cpl's Staying Connected Campaign](#). I'm enjoying the scheduled "Virtual Cafè" catch-ups, virtual lunches, step challenges and Zevo's (Cpl's wellness partner) wellness app.

When COVID-19 began it was a culture shock to me. I have adapted well and I'm now in the right mindset to focus and deal with the situation in hand. I miss being with my colleagues, but I am getting all the support that I need from my team who are keeping me engaged in the work that I am doing.

My tips for employers would be to:

Keep a routine & prioritise tasks:

When I am working, I normally sign in at 10:15 am. I set up my laptop at my desk in my home which I'm using as my office.

I check in with my manager and then I get assigned the work that I need to do. I check my emails and my manager prioritises my work that I do in terms of urgency.

I make sure that it's done effectively and is done right. If I have any questions about anything that I am working on I ask and get feedback when necessary on the work that I do which is very helpful.

I take my lunch as normal and take my 15-minute break in the afternoon to give my eyes a break. At the end of each day, before I sign off for the evening, I check in with my manager to give her an update on the work that has been done.

Stay connected:

I am staying connected with my team using Microsoft Teams. I really enjoy using it as I never used it before. The video aspect makes a big difference and I love being able to see my colleagues when I have my daily check-ins.

We haven't been together in so long; we nearly tend to forget what they look like otherwise. I also have my work WhatsApp group which is great to have and to be included in others' lives.

I also feel a lot more included since Cpl's Virtual Café launched, which I am enjoying and it's great to see new faces every week. I also love that we have the step challenges twice a week every week. It is great when you are a competitive person.

The Professionals Perspective: *Marie Devitt, TCPID Pathways Coordinator & Barbara Ringwood, TCPID Senior Occupational Therapist Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), School of Education, Trinity College Dublin*

The advice here is based upon our experience with our TCPID Graduate Internship programme and applies to office-based roles.

Technology

As with every employee, it is important to provide suitable technology that they can work on at home. Don't assume that everyone will have access to high-quality broadband, so if possible, in addition to a laptop you should

provide an internet dongle. This will help to alleviate any potential connection issues.

If the technology is new, you may need to provide some technical support for the initial setup. If this needs to be completed remotely discuss what's needed in terms of support. This could be supported from a family member to access the technology.

Routine

Many people including people with an [intellectual disability](#) work better with a structured routine.

Try, where possible, to maintain a routine or a schedule that matches what the office schedule had been previously. The work hours should be the same, for example, if an individual had been working from 10 am until 1 pm in the office, the same hours should be maintained for working virtually.

It's important for the individual not to continue working past the scheduled hours, even if the daily tasks haven't been completed.

Regular check-ins

Regular check-ins are a great way to support all employees and to reduce any feelings of concern or worry about the work being completed.

Schedule some one-on-one calls, as well as including everyone in virtual team meetings. Not everyone will feel comfortable participating in an online group chat so maybe check with people in advance before calling on them to speak in a group conversation.

Social interaction is hugely important for everyone. Coffee breaks should be included in the new remote working schedule. A virtual coffee break with a colleague or colleagues will help to maintain a sense of normality. The coffee breaks should be set at a specific time on each day where possible.

Ideally, a new remote working schedule should be given to the individual to include start time, coffee break time, team meetings, lunchtime and finish time on each day. Having an accessible, structured schedule helps to create a sense of structure and guidance.

Clear instructions and guidelines for tasks

Remote working can be challenging for a person with an intellectual disability as they don't have the same physical support of their mentor to demonstrate new tasks for them.

If a new task needs to be explained, provide multiple methods of instruction to it's clear what's expected and needed.

- Introduce one new task at a time. There should be no more than one new task introduced per week.
- Clear written instructions should always be provided. These should be in short sentences or bullet points using simple text.
- If possible, use instructional images to accompany the text.
- Where possible, avoid the use of acronyms or unfamiliar jargon
- In addition to the written instructions, demonstrate the task via a video call / shared screen
- Allow the individual the chance to do a test run of completing the task with the support of their colleague or mentor on screen before being asked to complete it alone.
- Allow time for practice within the working day before the task needs to be completed.

Always use clear, unambiguous instructions. For example, instead of saying "submit the completed file by the end of the day", you could say "email the Excel file with the 10 new supplier names and addresses to Marie Devitt at devittma@tcd.ie by 2 pm on Monday, May 11th."

It may be a good idea to only give the workload for each day on the day itself so that the individual does not become overwhelmed and knows that they have completed everything required of them.

Don't underestimate the capability of your employees

Never underestimate what your employees are capable of. Everyone can adapt to a new way of working if they have the right support and guidance from their mentor and their team.

It is also worth remembering that everyone is different so what works for some may not work for others.

Check with each of your employees to see what supports they would appreciate and what would help them to continue to do their work remotely throughout this crisis.

Cpl are proud members of Open Doors. The Open Doors Initiative provides opportunities to some of the marginalised members of our society – get involved and find out more www.opendoorsinitiative.ie or to find out more about our responsible business policies [click here](#).

For information about the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities or about becoming a TCPID Business Partner please contact Marie Devitt, TCPID Pathways Coordinator at devittma@tcd.ie