



Catalyst

Talent to transform // Issue 7

**BRAND
NEW
DIGITAL
FORMAT**

**A crossroads
for D&I? The
potential
and pitfalls
of 2020**

**COVID-19:
Bringing inclusion
and purpose
to the fore**



**THE
'DIVERSITY'
ISSUE**

Black Lives Matter

Pursuing true workforce diversity and inclusion



Building a truly diverse and inclusive workforce is a long-term endeavour that involves intentionality and commitment.

It goes beyond gender, race and ethnicity, taking in differences in age, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, education and socio-economic background; it represents “the art of thinking independently together”, in the words of Malcolm Forbes.

But in the wake of the death of George Floyd in the US, and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests around the world, there is an understandable focus on stamping out racism and creating a thriving environment for everyone at work, whatever their race or ethnicity.

While leaders champion this agenda, few organisations can currently be held up as genuine role models. At Alexander Mann Solutions, although we have made solid progress, we are acutely aware that we are at the beginning of a journey towards true diversity and inclusion (D&I).

Turning words into action

We acknowledge that we need to be better when it comes to ethnic representation. We accept that the deep structural changes needed must be led and supported by our senior leaders. We’re determined to take the necessary steps, no matter how uncomfortable, to turn words into action.

Some actions will be swift; others will take time. For example, we have begun by reviewing our demographics and are elevating our colleagues’ voices through regular open forums, unearthing insights that will inform and build career paths that are accessible to all our people. Training in unconscious bias, anti-racism and inclusion will be mandatory for everybody – from the top down – and managers will receive coaching and guidance on opening uncomfortable conversations and providing space to call out bias and racism. We maintain a network of employee-led groups which are tasked with addressing specific areas of diversity.

This work not only reflects the right ethical stance, but is also crucial to delivering the best service to our clients – most of whom will be journeying in a similar direction. As Emma Francis, D&I lead at Zurich UK, points out in our cover feature on p7: “Black Lives Matter has been a wake-up call for making ethnic diversity a more urgent priority for the business.”

A wave of humanity

In this issue, we consider the challenges and practicalities around pursuing D&I, with contributions and commentary from our clients, partners and experts in the field. We also explore current opportunities for progress; on p11, D&I director Aggie Mutuma argues that the perception of both racism and COVID-19 as “shared enemies” has led to a societal shift and “a wave of humanity in the workplace”.

“Leadership teams have had to consider the mental health of their staff as a result of lockdown restrictions, while having conversations about race and the lived experiences of under-represented people,” she explains, describing it as “an unparalleled gift for people professionals”.

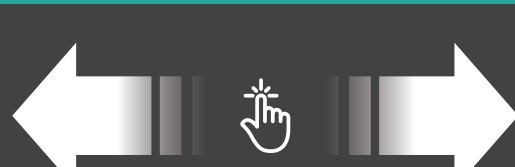
Let’s pledge to harness this momentum and create businesses that reflect the true diversity of society, embedding inclusivity in organisational culture – where all our colleagues feel heard and supported, and have a real sense of belonging.

David Leigh
CEO, Alexander Mann Solutions

“

While we have made solid progress, we are on a journey towards true diversity and inclusion

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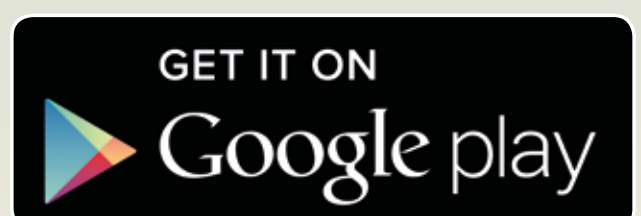
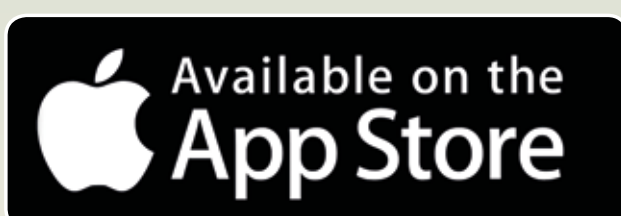
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***Black Lives Matter
has been a
wake-up call, making
ethnic diversity
a more urgent priority
for the business***

***Emma Francis,
Zurich UK***



JUMP TO PAGE 07



TO READ THE ARTICLE



How to support people with disabilities to thrive at work



Fuchsia Carter

Making informed adjustments, rather than knee-jerk assumptions, enables people with disabilities to add value, writes HSBC care consultant Fuchsia Carter.

I was brought on board a year ago by Alexander Mann Solutions as a candidate care consultant, to oversee reasonable adjustments for candidates with disabilities applying to HSBC. As a disabled person (I am a wheelchair user and have Ehlers-Danlos syndrome) I know, all too well, the challenges that can be faced during a recruitment process.

Often, people just don't know how to talk to those with disabilities, which results in their not putting the right reasonable adjustments in place. When I began my role, I was tasked with liaising with hiring managers to make sure that no one is discriminated against and the right help is there for disabled candidates.

At first, I had a lot of emails from hiring managers asking me to explain things. I'd assumed that everyone knew about certain levels of disability; for example, with diabetes, that you sometimes need to have a break to check your blood sugar levels or to eat. I thought that was just general knowledge. But it isn't, so it became a case of giving managers a glimpse into the disability world.

It's all about making small changes. It's not difficult or expensive, it just needs a little bit more understanding, research and letting go of assumptions

Frank and open conversations

People make things around disability recruitment incredibly complicated; they don't need to be. However, it's so important not to base action around assumptions. For example, don't assume that just because someone's got a disability, they're incapable of doing something. Have an open and frank conversation with them – don't be afraid to ask. Rather than saying "what's wrong with you?" or "do you need someone to fill out that application form for you?" ask "what can I do to help you; what do you need?" They will tell you in their own words.

If they're like me, they might need a little more time to answer questions. They might not be able to shake hands at interview or look an interviewer in the eye. I really struggle to look people in the face – I can't even do it on Zoom. If that happens, don't assume someone's being rude. The 'old-school' practices of wearing suits and shaking hands can be incredibly intimidating for someone with a disability like mine.

About seven months into my role, things really started to click into place; recruiters and hiring managers were no longer making assumptions and were asking fewer questions. I had positive feedback from colleagues saying that my insight is helping them to do their jobs better; that it helps take the guesswork out of everything. There has been an increase both in the number of disabled people being employed and in the proportion transferred internally to different jobs within HSBC. We've seen a rise in productivity across the account because of my work. It's a great feeling to receive such great feedback after just one year in the job.



1.3 billion people globally have some sort of disability



19% of the UK's working population has some sort of disability



People with disabilities have a global spending power of \$8 trillion

Someone to talk to

I'm also here to support candidates. Going through the process of changing jobs, especially if you're at risk of redundancy, is incredibly stressful. If you have a high level of anxiety or poor mental health, you're not necessarily going to be thinking straight. I've had quite a lot of people contact me upset, especially during COVID. But they just want someone to talk to and to understand what is going on in their heads. I'm that person; I've supported around 1,000 people so far.

I think Alexander Mann Solutions is leading the way on this. I don't know of any other company in the UK that has someone solely looking after reasonable adjustments for candidates with disabilities. And although I'm based within HSBC, I'm also able to support other clients.

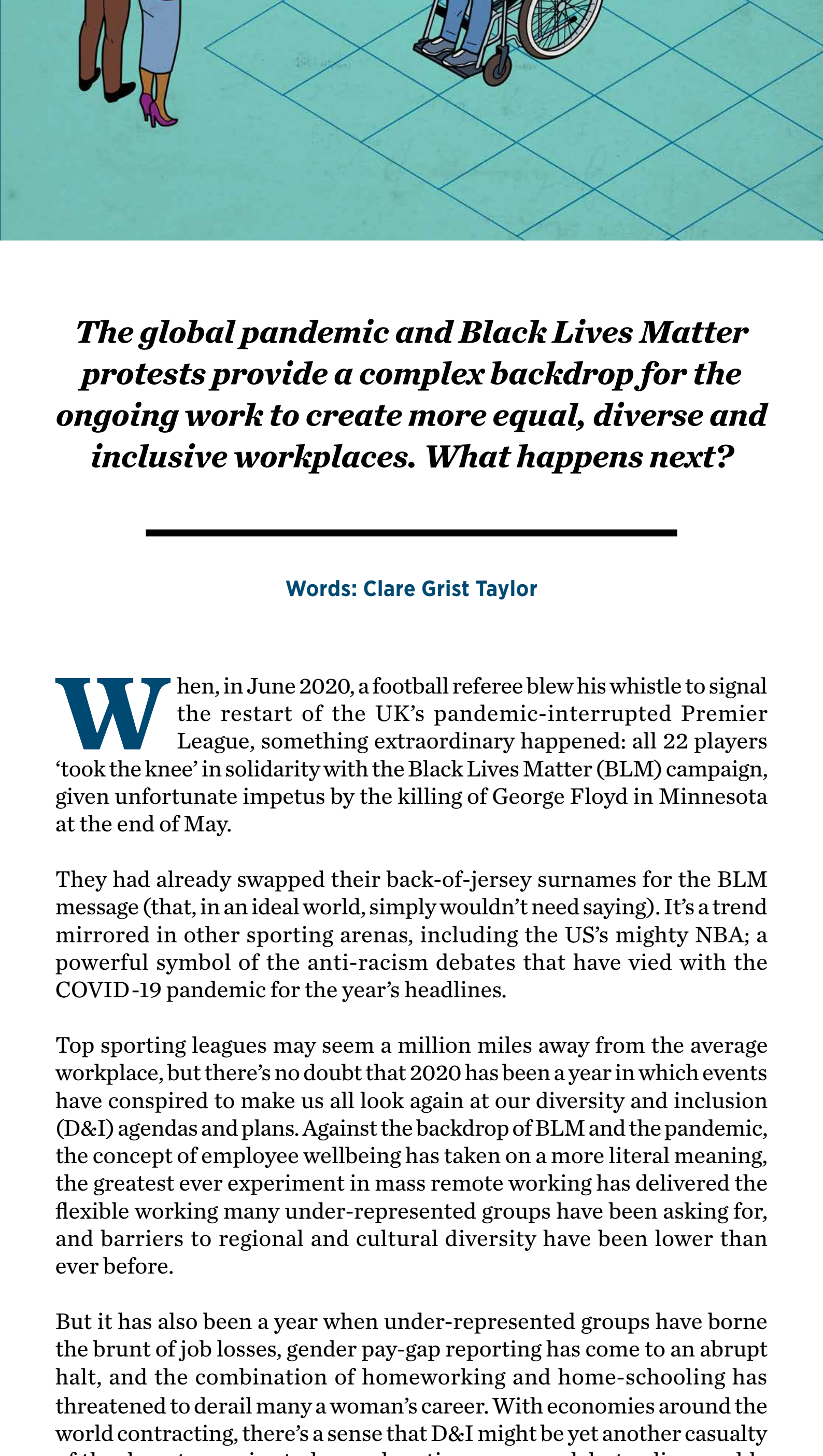
Ultimately, it's all about making small changes. It's not difficult or expensive, it just needs a little bit more understanding, research and letting go of assumptions. It's just stripping it back to basics and literally asking "what can I do to help you? Let me know. Email me, call me, I'm here".

Fuchsia Carter is an Alexander Mann Solutions care candidate consultant, working onsite at HSBC to oversee reasonable adjustments for candidates with disabilities.



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT A CROSSROADS:

the potential and pitfalls of 2020



The global pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests provide a complex backdrop for the ongoing work to create more equal, diverse and inclusive workplaces. What happens next?

Words: Clare Grist Taylor

When, in June 2020, a football referee blew his whistle to signal the restart of the UK's pandemic-interrupted Premier League, something extraordinary happened: all 22 players 'took the knee' in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign, given unfortunate impetus by the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota at the end of May.

They had already swapped their back-of-jersey surnames for the BLM message (that, in an ideal world, simply wouldn't need saying). It's a trend mirrored in other sporting arenas, including the US's mighty NBA; a powerful symbol of the anti-racism debates that have vied with the COVID-19 pandemic for the year's headlines.

Top sporting leagues may seem a million miles away from the average workplace, but there's no doubt that 2020 has been a year in which events have conspired to make us all look again at our diversity and inclusion (D&I) agendas and plans. Against the backdrop of BLM and the pandemic, the concept of employee wellbeing has taken on a more literal meaning, the greatest ever experiment in mass remote working has delivered the flexible working many under-represented groups have been asking for, and barriers to regional and cultural diversity have been lower than ever before.

But it has also been a year when under-represented groups have borne the brunt of job losses, gender pay-gap reporting has come to an abrupt halt, and the combination of homeworking and home-schooling has threatened to derail many a woman's career. With economies around the world contracting, there's a sense that D&I might be yet another casualty of the downturn: nice to have when times are good, but a dispensable luxury when belt tightening is in order.

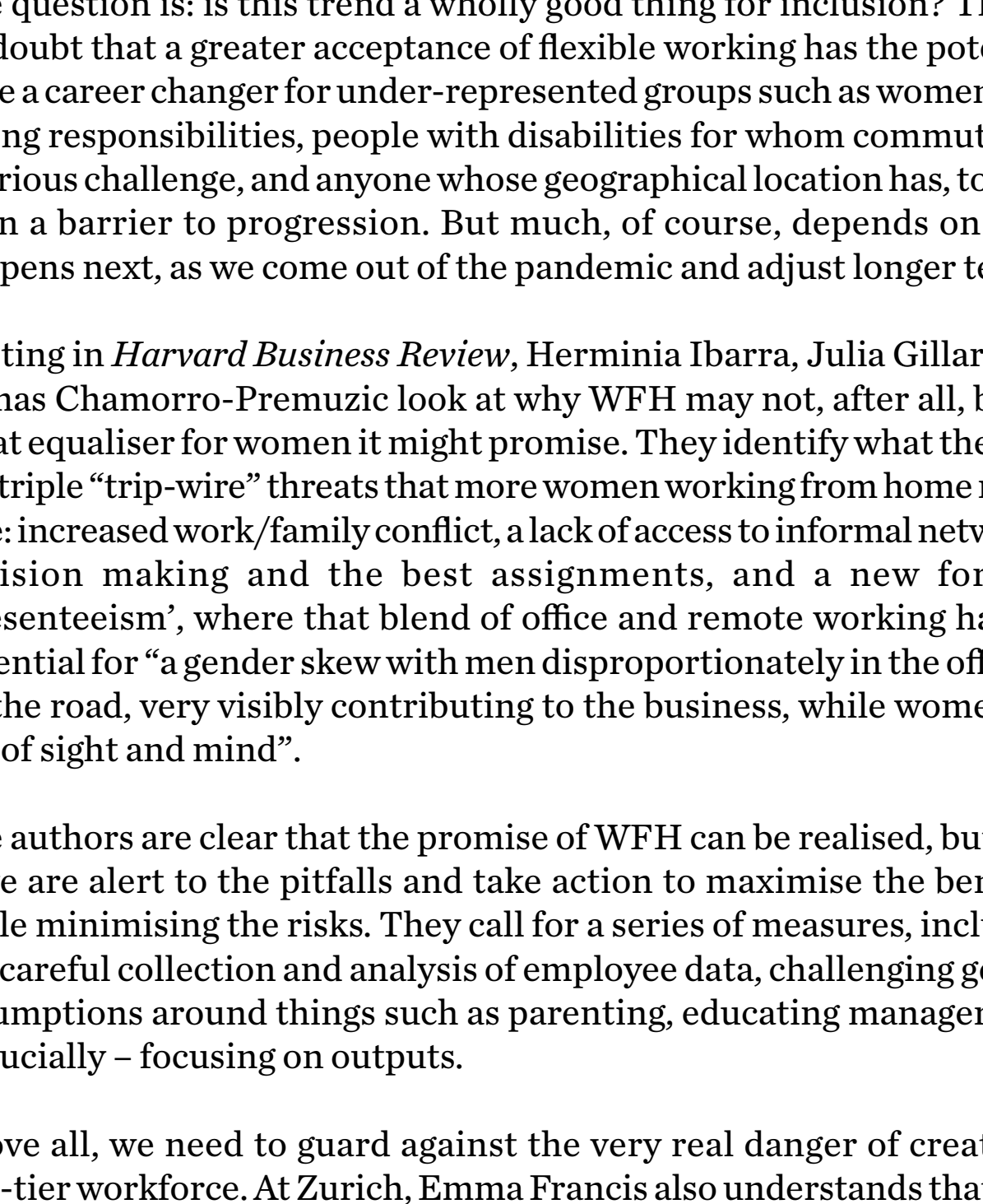
In the early stages of the pandemic, writer and broadcaster Trevor Phillips wrote that the trauma of the pandemic was likely to have two effects: "The first is to accelerate change that is already on the way. The second is to exacerbate the existing divisions in society."

COVID has created strong bonds and goodwill we simply can't afford to lose when it comes to inclusion

When it comes to D&I, will we look back on 2020 as a year when we really were all in it together, or one of mixed progress at best, even retrenchment? With everything up for grabs, how will organisations build on any progress made and heal what journalist Katie Jacobs calls "a fracturing of the workforce", bringing together, both physically and psychologically, workforces that may have had very different experiences of 2020?

Despite the challenges, for many D&I teams, progress made in 2020 represents the single biggest opportunity in a generation to secure long-term change in the way that work is designed and executed – and they feel that now is the time to push home their advantage.

Emma Francis, D&I lead at Zurich UK, reports that her team has "achieved more in six months than we otherwise could have done in 18". The company may already have bought into the need for a diverse workforce as a key to a sustainable future, but, despite 2020 being a time of uncertainty and anxiety, it has also been a time when the business has responded as a team, and when people have felt closer to the organisation and more empowered. The challenge now is to "make the most of the opportunities 2020 has opened up".



The demise of presenteeism?

Nowhere is that challenge more evident than when it comes to flexible and remote working. Cultures of presenteeism have been well and truly questioned, as offices have closed and organisations have had no choice but to make the most of people working from home (WFH) where they possibly can.

Paul Modley, Alexander Mann Solutions' Head of D&I, is clear that the pandemic has shown that people can be just as productive WFH – and, mostly, they like the extra flexibility it can bring. "Despite the extra pressures many have had to face when working from home during the pandemic – from childcare and home-schooling to lack of space and isolation – it's impossible to ignore the fact that, overall, greater flexibility has been a positive for the majority of workers," he says.

It's a view backed up by survey after survey, with the most popular option for a post-pandemic working life being a hybrid of the positives of being with colleagues some of the time and the flexibility of not having to commute five days a week. And this time, organisations are listening too – and not just the usual tech-giant suspects such as Google or Facebook.

As Modley says, when we see the likes of financial services giant Schroders heeding the flexible working call, we know something has shifted. It seems that we're heading for a jettisoning of expensive city-centre real estate as offices morph from default work locations into collaborative spaces. A recent *Management Today* survey revealed that UK business leaders see two days a week in the office as sufficient time to sustain company culture.

The question is: is this trend a wholly good thing for inclusion? There's no doubt that a greater acceptance of flexible working has the potential to be a career changer for under-represented groups such as women with caring responsibilities, and people with disabilities for whom commuting is a serious challenge, and anyone whose geographical location has, to date, been a barrier to progression. But much, of course, depends on what happens next, as we come out of the pandemic and adjust longer term.

Writing in *Harvard Business Review*, Herminia Ibarra, Julia Gillard and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic look at why WFH may not, after all, be the great equaliser for women it might promise. They identify what they call the triple "trip-wire" threats that more women working from home might face: increased work/family conflict, a lack of access to informal networks, decision making and the best assignments, and a new form of 'presenteeism', where that blend of office and remote working has the potential for "a gender skew with men disproportionately in the office or on the road, very visibly contributing to the business, while women are out of sight and mind".

The authors are clear that the promise of WFH can be realised, but only if we are alert to the pitfalls and take action to maximise the benefits, while minimising the risks. They call for a series of measures, including the careful collection and analysis of employee data, challenging gender assumptions around things such as parenting, educating managers and – crucially – focusing on outputs.

Above all, we need to guard against the very real danger of creating a two-tier workforce. At Zurich, Emma Francis also understands that with the awareness that more flexible working is here to stay comes the responsibility for making sure that people in multiple locations feel engaged and included. It's a change of mindset underpinned by an explicit acknowledgement that, in future, they will need to accommodate and manage a variety of working arrangements. Flexible working is not new for Zurich, but the pandemic has accelerated the trend; the challenge now is to make it work in ways that support rather than challenge inclusion.

I think we will look back at this period and realise just how damaging it has been for some sections of our society

Shyamala Shukla, director of talent acquisition at US-based medical device company Medtronic, is determined that the pandemic-imposed shift to more flexible business models should not jeopardise the progress made to gender, regional and cultural diversity in recent years. Instead, initiatives such as their global programmes to attract and develop female talent and the Medtronic Women's Network (MWNN) have been mobilised to support women through lockdown – as well as meeting business needs. An internal-first approach to talent and redeployment has created new opportunities for women, and changes to working practices have led to what Shukla calls an "empathy dividend".

As elsewhere, the pandemic has been challenging for women, but with a range of informal and formal interaction, toolkits for managers and plenty of peer-to-peer support, changes to working practices have been normalised and the organisation has learned important lessons about how best to integrate women into the workforce. Conversations about the safe return to work now routinely include topics such as leave policies that take into account caring responsibilities and long-term flexible-working cultures. "It's about creating the right levels of psychological safety to enable a balancing of home and work life," says Shukla. "COVID has created strong bonds and goodwill we simply can't afford to lose when it comes to inclusion."

Black lives really do matter

If COVID has transformed the world of flexible working, 2020's twin focus on Black Lives Matter has had a similarly seismic effect on conversations about ethnicity and racism in the workplace.

Suki Sandhu, founder and CEO of D&I champions INvolve, says that, in recent months, he has had "honest conversations with business leaders about black inclusion which never would have happened before BLM". Companies and business leaders who might previously have ducked the issue have seen the need to engage properly and take real action on racial inequality in their organisations.

Talk, though, is cheap. Sandhu has also been at the forefront of securing a commitment from companies by inviting top CEOs (44 and counting) to sign an open letter committing to action to end "systematic racism and discrimination" in their organisations. The letter calls for initiatives such as the proper collection of ethnicity data to show where the real challenges lie and allow for the tracking of progress. It also commits signatories to setting targets for black talent on candidate slates and shortlists. Significantly, it challenges us to educate ourselves about the experiences of black people at work and beyond, to celebrate black success, and to have the vulnerability to admit that more needs to be done.

And while debates continue, especially in the US, about the extent to which BLM has been a positive force for change for other ethnic minorities, notably the wider Lantinx and Hispanic communities, it's been another important reminder that we need to approach ethnicity and race in a nuanced and considered way. Ethnic and racial discrimination will and does manifest itself in different ways for different groups and communities. We need to avoid at all costs a sense that "one size fits all".

That's another reason why having those conversations, backed up by concrete plans for action, has also been important for Alexander Mann Solutions' revitalised approach to anti-racism in the light of BLM. Paul Modley reports that their minority employees have felt empowered by



the protests to speak up and be more candid about the change they want to see. "Anti-racism is now part of the company's vocabulary in a way it hasn't been before," says Modley. As a result, the company is revising and finessing demographic data so that it can put in place the right plans to increase diversity at all levels of the business via a comprehensive set of talent acquisition and development actions. It's also refreshing its training around conscious inclusion for everyone from senior leaders down, and developing a strategic plan to keep the progress made to the fore and sustainable.

Zurich's Emma Francis is candid that the company's initial D&I efforts were focused almost exclusively on gender. They have, though, been collecting data around ethnicity since 2015, and had become increasingly aware that the company was under-represented in terms of black, Asian and other ethnic minority (BAME) employees, especially in multi-cultural locations such as London and Birmingham. The strategic decision to focus more on ethnicity was made back in 2019, followed by signing up to Business in the Community's *Race at Work Charter*. Still, BLM has been a seminal moment. As at Alexander Mann Solutions, under-represented employees started asking "what's your response?". It has also been a catalyst for all employees to get on board to support these under-represented colleagues.

For Francis, the key has been to engage with BAME colleagues to understand their real-life experiences and to make sure the response has been meaningful. Their UK CEO provided that crucial buy-in from the top by personally writing to all employees and chairing the Diversity Council. The executive team has asked BAME employees for their feedback, which Francis describes as "some good; some sobering; all very powerful".

The company reported on its ethnicity pay gap for the first time in June this year. "BLM has provided the context for those necessary conversations, which has helped to push forward the agenda," says Francis. "It's been a wake-up call, making ethnic diversity a more urgent priority for the business."

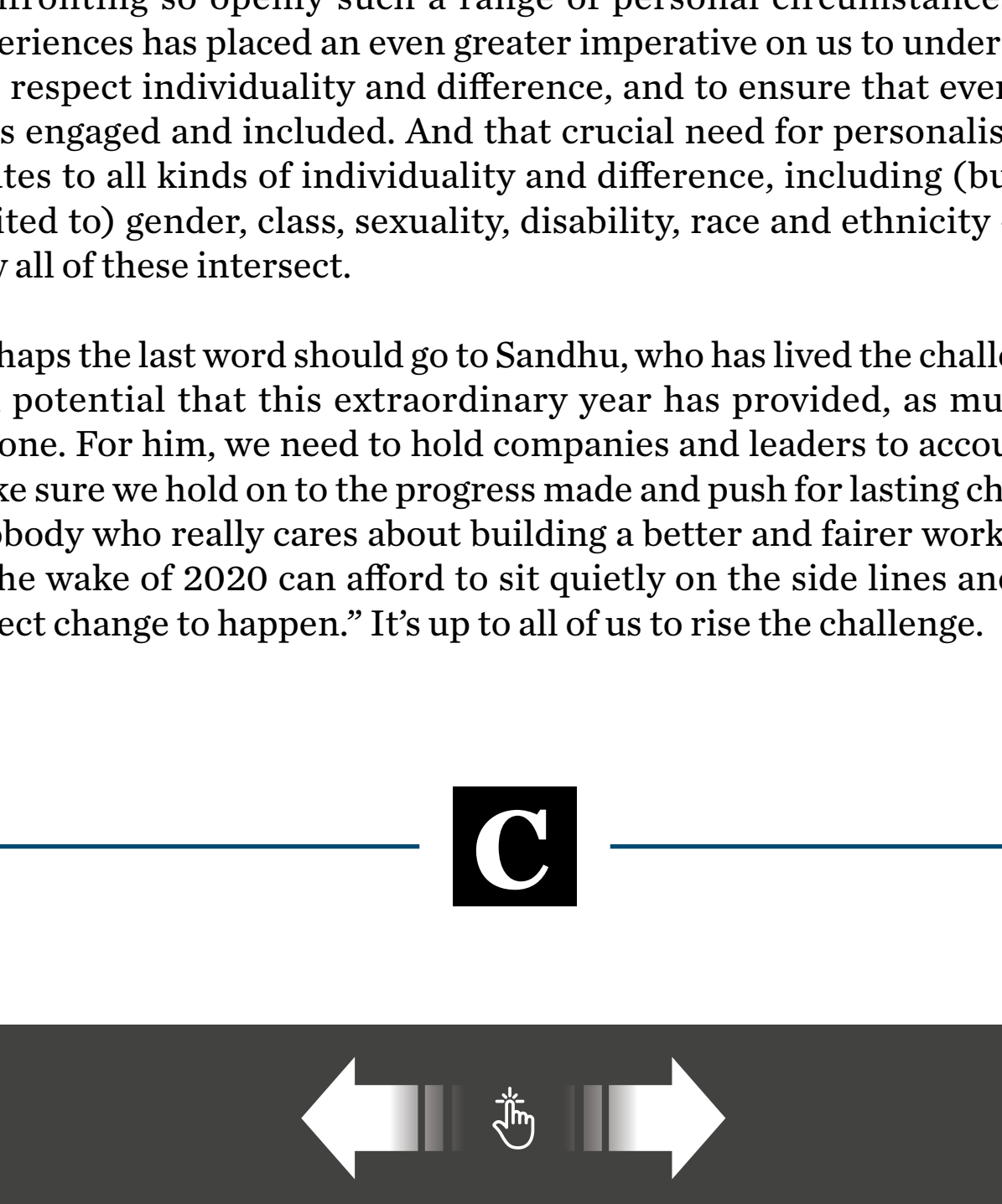
Anti-racism is now part of the company's vocabulary in a way it hasn't been before

It's the economy, stupid

Despite all of the undoubted progress made, it's a sobering fact that the economic fallout from the pandemic still threatens wider D&I progress.

In October 2020, the US's National Women's Law Centre reported that women have disproportionately suffered COVID-related job losses; the picture was especially bleak for black and Latinx women. McKinsey estimates that, globally, women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to the pandemic than men's jobs. And we know that all under-represented groups – often employed in the service sector – have been the hardest hit when it comes to job losses, lack of career progression and access to support services. Not everyone has been able to work from home, had a supportive employer or benefited from greater awareness of systemic racism at work. Suki Sandhu is unequivocal when he says: "I think we will look back at this period and realise just how damaging it has been for some sections of our society."

But, for Sandhu, D&I retrenchment should be the last things on our minds. Even in organisations that have been hit hard financially in 2020, we need the kind of forward thinking that realises that "improving diversity and inclusive thinking is part of the solution", continuing with the levels of investment needed to drive economic recovery. D&I teams shouldn't be a "nice to have", but a key part of company strategy, charged with educating and empowering senior teams to create clear, evidenced plans for real change. And we know that matters: what's good for equality is also good for the economy and society as a whole.



Modley agrees. "Right now, there's understandably a lot of uncertainty around the economic situation and job security. But if we can weather the storm, there are real opportunities to drive further change." And this doesn't just mean change for home-based white-collar workers. Sandhu believes that 2020 has the potential – once and for all – to redefine the workplace and the future of work in ways that will level the playing field for everyone. Katie Jacobs calls for "open and inclusive cultures, where honest conversations are welcomed" and where people are given "voice and choice".

Can we create, out of the extraordinary events of this year, a new social contract when it comes to how and where we work, with people and positive workplace cultures to the fore?

Maybe. But we underestimate the forces of the status quo and vested interests at our peril. The authors of the latest McKinsey Diversity report, *Diversity Wins*, are clear that we are at the cusp of a D&I crossroads. For some companies, D&I risks becoming that unaffordable luxury, a diversion that could "easily take a backseat", jeopardising the painstaking progress made in recent years, and the ability of companies to bounce back with the necessary resilience and innovation. The report also recognises that deprioritising D&I is a threat not only to the bottom line, but also to people's lives, reinforcing again that diverse talent is disproportionately at risk during a downturn.

On the other hand, the report is bullish in its defence of the business case for diversity, with the dynamics around diversity and inclusion a "critical differentiator for companies". It quotes evidence that diverse companies are "likely to make better, bolder decisions – a critical capability in the crisis". It champions the need for existing management routines to be challenged to make the most of the diversity-boosting and talent-enhancing potential of flexible working. It suggests that, with stakeholders more likely to interrogate a company's purpose and values in a crisis, those companies that retain that early pandemic "sense of solidarity" by reaffirming their commitment to D&I are positioning themselves well to weather the storm.

Respect for individuality

Disruption is undoubtedly a misused and over-used word, but it would perhaps be excusable to apply it to the unprecedented events of 2020. And, as with all disruption, it has the potential for both good and ill. The combined forces of COVID and BLM have conspired to create an environment where equality, diversity and inclusion are simultaneously front of mind and under threat. D&I teams know better than anyone that this year has provided a step-change in how we perceive our work relationships. An emphasis on physical safety has shone an even brighter light on the importance of psychological safety and mental wellbeing.

Confronting so openly such a range of personal circumstances and experiences has placed an even greater imperative on us to understand and respect individuality and difference, and to ensure that everyone feels engaged and included. And that crucial need for personalisation relates to all kinds of individuality and difference, including (but not limited to) gender, class, sexuality, disability, race and ethnicity – and how all of these intersect.

Perhaps the last word should go to Sandhu, who has lived the challenges and potential that this extraordinary year has provided, as much as anyone. For him, we need to hold companies and leaders to account to make sure we hold on to the progress made and push for lasting change: "Nobody who really cares about building a better and fairer workplace in the wake of 2020 can afford to sit quietly on the side lines and still expect change to happen." It's up to all of us to rise the challenge.

Re-energising anti-racism strategy and examining our values



Paul Modley

When Black Lives Matter hit the news again this year, Alexander Mann Solutions' diversity and inclusion team revitalised the company's approach to discrimination, writes Paul Modley.

Business cannot and does not exist in a bubble. There are some moments in history which define us, offer a step-change to how we view the world and see each other, whether at work or beyond. When #MeToo went viral in 2017, we knew we could no longer ignore the blight of sexual harassment and abuse. When images of a Minnesota policeman kneeling on George Floyd's neck stunned the world in May this year, there was a sense that something must be done; that enough was enough when it came to racism and discrimination.

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been a defining moment of 2020, the effects of which have reached so many of us. As the guardians of diversity and inclusion (D&I) at Alexander Mann Solutions, we've been at the forefront of equality, diversity and inclusion for many years. We pride ourselves on the progress made with a whole range of traditionally under-represented groups: offering inclusion-enabling work practices for working mothers, championing social mobility and providing opportunities for people with disabilities. BLM has provided an immediate and urgent imperative to do more about our lack of ethnic diversity.

We need to continue to see people as individuals, with unique backgrounds and experiences, and recognise this when it comes to work design and culture

Importantly, much of that impetus has come from our minority colleagues themselves. They have felt empowered by the protests to speak up and be more candid about the change they want to see. The ability to have frank conversations about racism has been a game changer. Anti-racism is now part of the company's vocabulary in a way it hasn't been before. People are not just expressing their feelings, but also making specific requests about greater visibility and the need for a proper plan. They want to see a commitment.

As a result, we are revisiting demographic data so that we can put in place the right plans to increase diversity at all levels of our business via a comprehensive set of talent acquisition and development actions. We're also refreshing our training around conscious inclusion for everyone from our senior leaders down, and developing a strategic plan to keep the progress made to the fore and sustainable. Visible buy-in from the very top has been really important, too.

Ensuring psychological safety

We know this is just the start. We need to continue to provide the platforms for people to talk – and, crucially, we need to listen. We need to create the psychological safety to allow people to open up and to have those uncomfortable conversations around racism. We need to be sensitive about the use of language, but not to the extent that we use this as an excuse for not having those conversations at all. We've learned from our minority colleagues that "it's better to say something not quite right than not say anything at all" – provided the positive intent is there.

More than ever, we need to continue to see people as individuals, with unique backgrounds and experiences, and recognise this when it comes to work design and culture. Our regular pulse surveys will measure sentiment around inclusion and belonging, broken down by demographics to allow for finer analysis.

Coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM has made us even more aware of how important it is to articulate our purpose, vision and values. It's made us think carefully about our leadership behaviours and what we stand for. We're learning that the people with whom we work want to experience our values at every touch point.

We need to continue our journey to place people and culture – rather than process – are the core of everything we do. BLM has made us more thoughtful and intentional about ethnic diversity, but it's also reinforced that wider change, one that will make us a better business for the future.

Paul Modley leads the internally facing D&I team at Alexander Mann Solutions.



***Now is the time for
people teams to ride this
wave of humanity
in the workplace and
make significant,
lasting changes***

***Aggie Mutuma,
Mahogany Inclusion Partners***



JUMP TO PAGE 11



TO READ THE ARTICLE

Moving the dial on diversity and inclusion



Rachel Arter

Rachel Arter, client services managing director at Alexander Mann Solutions, is championing the company's agenda on diversity and inclusion and exploring best practice.

Tell us about your new role and how it relates to diversity and inclusion?

Having worked in talent acquisition since 1999 (and at Alexander Mann Solutions for 10 years, in various roles) I recently became client services managing director, leading a portfolio of clients and teams, across sectors, from a relationship, operational delivery and business-development perspective. I'm particularly interested in what different organisations are doing with respect to driving the diversity and inclusion (D&I) agenda forward and look forward to gaining insights across industries.

Have you faced professional challenges due to your gender or ethnicity?

I've been fortunate not to have experienced too many issues in my recent career; the challenges I've faced have been limited to outside of my professional life.

Alexander Mann Solutions is 71% female, with a large number of female role models at senior-leadership and executive-committee level, many of whom have played an instrumental part in my own career journey. I would say, though, that as a person of Chinese origin, I can very often be the only non-white person in a meeting (whether client or internal). We have more to do at Alexander Mann Solutions to ensure that we are ethnically diverse at all levels, but especially within our senior-leadership population.

I take my responsibility of being a diverse role model very seriously and have become particularly mindful of this in recent years. It's led me to play an active part within the company, to support our ethnicity agenda. I set up our Global Ethnicity Board last year with this aim in mind.

The pressure is on to make an immediate impact by delivering on what have been some very bold public commitments

What key issues are your clients facing from a D&I perspective?

Most corporate businesses are experiencing similar challenges with respect to D&I. While, in the UK, gender balance has been many organisations' primary focus for a number of years, attention is increasingly turning to ethnic representation, following the death of George Floyd in the US in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests.

Many people feel that if we cannot move the dial on D&I with the investment and executive sponsorship that exists today, we never will. This means the pressure is really on to make an immediate impact by delivering on what have been some very bold public commitments.

However, in truth, attracting diverse talent into some sectors is a real challenge. Whether that's down to particular skill sets lacking within this demographic, or a lack of interest from the talent pool in joining some industries, it isn't an overnight fix. With this in mind, many organisations are looking at what they can do at grassroots level; for example, through increased incentives and partnerships with schools and colleges. There is also an increased focus on retaining diverse talent, as it can be difficult to ensure a diverse slate at more senior levels.

How can we increase the representation of minority groups in business, in practical terms?

Along with ensuring we have the right brand and attraction strategies, and the right interventions throughout our talent acquisition processes, we need to focus more on embedding a culture of appropriate behaviour within the organisation, particularly for decision makers when it comes to hiring or promotions.

It's critical that this isn't seen as a tick-box exercise or a means of meeting a performance objective. Educating people around the importance of having diverse representation within teams will be key, alongside identifying and addressing unconscious bias.

This should help us to move past a short-term focus on D&I to achieving long-term, sustainable changes in how we make hiring decisions. It's important to understand that this is not just a hiring issue; the right behaviour must be embedded across the entire organisation in order to drive real change.

Rachel Arter is client services managing director at Alexander Mann Solutions.

Harnessing social consciousness to enhance culture



Aggie Mutuma

Compassionate leadership presents a gift to people professionals, writes diversity and inclusion director Aggie Mutuma.

Social justice, equality and self-reflection; these are terms that many of us have read, discussed and explored more in the past few months than in the rest of our lives. The backlash against the killing in police custody of an African-American man in the US, in the midst of a novel coronavirus pandemic, has led to an awakening in people across all walks of life; a sense that we have shared ‘enemies’ (the virus and racism) and shared goals to end both.

As with any seismic societal shift, this awakening has made its way into organisations, where leadership teams have had to consider the mental health of their staff as a result of lockdown restrictions, while having conversations about race and the lived experiences of under-represented people. Words such as ‘care’, ‘consideration’ and ‘compassion’ are becoming common parlance in leadership discussions.

The value of ‘softness’

Personally, I am encouraged by the ‘softness’, care and compassion I now see reflected in the thoughts of leaders; in this, I see an unparalleled gift for people professionals. Both staff and managers have joined the call for flexible working, for equity and fairness in the workplace and for leaders to listen, reflect and learn from their people. Never before has there been such an open conversation about employees’ lived experiences and the role that leaders have to play in this.

Now is the time for people teams to ride this wave of humanity in the workplace and make significant, lasting changes for their people and their organisations. We have a chance to do the following:

Review and reflect, taking stock of our organisations’ employee value proposition (EVP) through the new lenses provided by both the pandemic and the ‘black lives matter’ conversations. People teams should ask themselves whether their organisations are caring, fair spaces, within which there is equality and all voices are heard equally. If the answer is “no” to any of these, action is required.

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Engage in conversations, talking openly with employees. This includes their experience of the pandemic and the support they need. We must also talk to our people about race, asking about their lived experiences, what we need to do better and what changes they want to see. Our inquisitive listening, our desire to learn and the open sharing, will serve to build and strengthen organisational culture.

Take action after reviewing, reflecting and conversing, making tangible changes and talking to our people about them. Whether these includes changing policies and practices, introducing shared targets, developing inclusive competencies or committing to working with suppliers run by under-represented groups, every organisation has changes that they can make.

Globally, there is a heightened sense of consciousness and activism in society and this undoubtedly spills into the workplace. People professionals have an opportunity to step into their light and work to make their organisations the caring, equal and just workplaces we have always wanted them to be.

Aggie Mutuma is diversity & inclusion director, HR leader and executive coach at Mahogany Inclusion Partners, applying an HR lens as she supports leadership teams to develop diverse, inclusive and winning cultures.



***One model of working
life does not fit all –
especially during
a global viral
pandemic***

***Cali Williams Yost,
Flex+Strategy Group***



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TO READ THE ARTICLE

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the psychology of remote teams



Cali Williams Yost

Stabilising the performance, psychological wellbeing and inclusivity of remote teams involves learning from our experiences over the past nine months, writes Cali Williams Yost, founder of the Flex+Strategy Group.

In March, employers around the globe told millions of workers – practically overnight – to “work from home until further notice”. Many of these employees had never worked remotely before. Most were given no training or guidance on how to work effectively in such a radically new way.

Yet, remarkably, these newly formed remote teams figured out how to survive in real time. People got on with their jobs and managed complex personal responsibilities in the face of extraordinary economic uncertainty. However, this crisis-driven, ‘trial-by-fire’ response will be difficult to sustain for another six to nine months – the point at which experts estimate it will be safe to recalibrate work back into physical workspaces.

To stabilise the performance, psychological wellbeing and inclusivity of remote teams in the near term, it’s important to understand how this rapid shift has already changed the way members think about and approach their jobs, their lives and each other. We must leverage this learning to reimagine work going forward and lay the foundations for what will probably be a hybrid onsite/remote reality, post-pandemic.

Communicating and co-ordinating

The sudden onset of COVID-19 restrictions destroyed the traditional boundaries between work and life. Not only did the strict 9-5 and the commutes disappear, so did the educational and caregiving supports many workers relied on to do their jobs. Remote workers have had to consider the realities of both work and life, when planning, coordinating and executing priorities.

One model of working life does not fit all – especially during a global viral pandemic. Therefore, setting boundaries has required a level of shared accountability between each worker and their manager. Establishing this

Remote workers have had to consider the realities of both work and life, when planning, co-ordinating and executing priorities

has been a challenge; managers can set clear priorities and make it safe to problem solve, but optimising the way work and life fit together, based on current realities, is up to every individual and the team. That requires a new skill set that most people do not have.

In our 2018 study of full-time workers in the US (involving a nationally representative sample), only 17% of respondents said they frequently used video- or web-conferencing software to update supervisors and colleagues about work progress. It’s clear, then, that when the pandemic hit, most remote workers faced a steep learning curve when it came to adopting the digital tools to communicate and co-ordinate with each other and their customers.

While many successfully climbed the curve, challenges such as so-called “Zoom fatigue” are a symptom of a deeper need to organise and prioritise current communication channels; to clarify which channels to use when and how to use them most effectively, according to what we are communicating; to specify where both formal communications and informal gatherings are happening virtually and invite people to participate, as they prefer.

Some employees may love video-conferencing ‘happy hours’ where pets, partners and children participate freely in the activities, while others may prefer to keep their private lives separate and to take part in smaller, more intimate team-building sessions; for example, break-out room lunch chats during work hours.

From where we work to what we do

The rapid transition to remote and flexible working, experienced by so many for such an extended period of time, will change the operating DNA of organisations. For remote teams, work has already become less about ‘where we go’ and more about ‘what we do’. This requires managing to clear performance metrics (around outcomes versus presence); organisational culture must be founded on a shared purpose and impact (versus shared place and space).

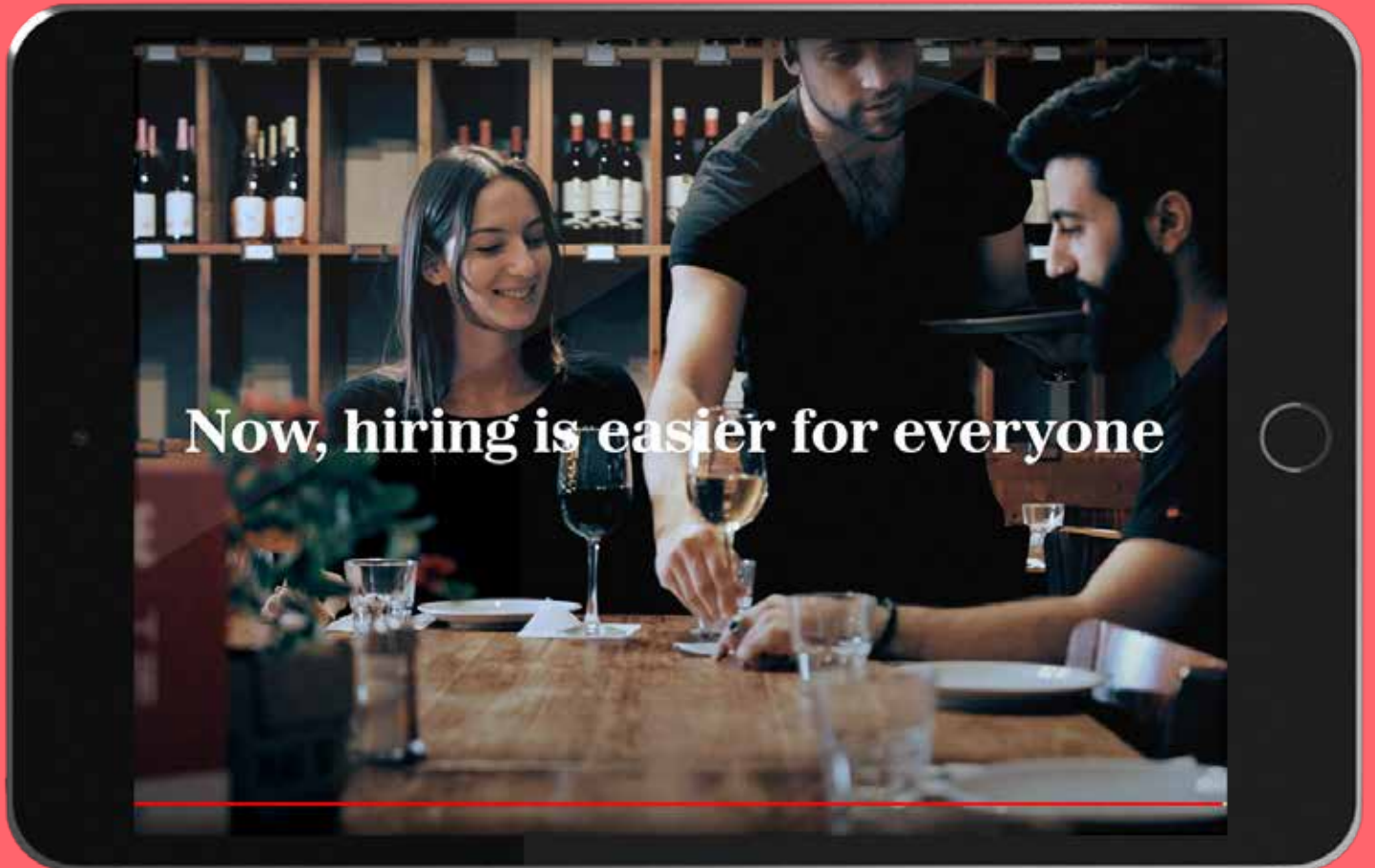
The sudden shift to remote working has forced each of us to rethink how we approach our jobs, our lives and one another. Now we must define and leverage what we have learned, in order to stabilise the way remote teams operate in the near-term by:

- giving remote teams and their managers the knowledge, skills and tools to collaborate and set better, more sustainable boundaries between work and life
- clarifying and co-ordinating when and how to use different digital communication channels
- emphasising outcomes to gauge performance, and shared purpose to define culture.

In the process, we will also be positioning our organisations to rebuild, and grow stronger and better, in the flexible and dynamic post-pandemic reality.

Cali Williams Yost is founder and CEO of the Flex+Strategy Group, a solutions company helping organisations to unlock performance and engagement. She is a leading authority on high-performance work flexibility.

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