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FUTURE OF WORK

# Remote working spotlights neurodiversity challenges



IVY LIU

DECEMBER 21, 2020 by [JESSICA DAVIES](#)

*This article is part of the Future of Work briefing, a weekly email with stories, interviews, trends and links about how work, workplaces and workforces are changing. [Sign up here.](#)*

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Imagine making a phone or video call and not being able to formulate your first word. The client or colleague on the other side mistakes the silence for a bad connection or starts to feel uncomfortable, which prolongs

to-face meeting isn't so easy when it's over video or phone with a stranger.

That's the reality for Will Laven, an operations executive for Publicis Media, who has a stammer that has become accentuated as a direct result of the enforced remote working thrust on most industries in the last nine months.

Before the coronavirus pandemic hit, Laven attended regular social events and in-person meetings which provided frequent opportunities to speak and helped provide the necessary practice for his stammer. The typical water cooler moments that most have missed have been even more keenly felt by Laven.

"I have realized my stammer is better in person and

how much you talk in the office, in the kitchen, the lift, or going to the local coffee shop. That all warms up my stammer ready for when I have a meeting or a catch up with my team. I'm more self conscious of it when on camera and on a call than when I am in person."

Over the years, Laven has worked hard to conquer his speech impediment, attending the Michael Palin School for Stammering Children, which prepared him to join the apprenticeship scheme at Publicis Media. He now works in the operations team, helping to book and manage different campaigns across TV, video-on-demand and social for clients including Procter & Gamble. While colleagues are supportive, the lack of in-person practice has also affected him outside the workplace.

asked rolled his eyes when I stammered,” Laven said. “The masks have made that even harder. When I phone people they will sometimes put the phone down because they can’t see I’m stammering so presume it’s a bad connection.”

The neurodiversity spectrum is wide, ranging from speech impediments, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette syndrome, to autism and bipolarity. For introverted personalities, the enforced remote working caused by the coronavirus pandemic has in many ways been beneficial. For many extroverts, it’s had the opposite effect.

Group Zoom calls, in which half the team is on mute or have turned off their cameras, also make it challenging to pick up on body language. Often, the loudest — rather than the smartest — voices dominate

Reed, UK managing director of Essence. “But the best ideas often come from the smartest, not the loudest people in the room.”

Catering to all personality types, some of which thrive off totally different environments, will be a challenge and focus for many agencies when it comes to redesigning their offices, said Emma Robertson, CEO of Engine Transformation.

For many, the former model of lines of desks or pods is being replaced with hot-desking and collaborative-work areas as businesses try to cater to the new norm. But the lack of a fixed desk or work location could be very unsettling working conditions for those who have forms of neurodiversity like autism, according to Robertson.

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our office planning for a return to work,” she said. The trick will be determining how to create safe spaces for people who need repetition, quiet spaces and the certainty of where they will be sitting, alongside the needs of those who thrive off being around other people. Before mass remote working, the default bias was often to recognize the strength and leadership potential in extroverts, but that imbalance needs readdressing, added Robertson.

“We are doing some sessions in the first quarter about the power of the introvert, and will do some educating around that, on what is the power of the introvert and how does great leadership manifest itself from an introvert point of view,” she added. How do you create space so people all have an

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**Describe how this year has been for you as a leader of a large workforce.**

Very challenging. It's been a really good year in some ways: From a business perspective we have had to accelerate change in a way we wouldn't have if we weren't in a pandemic. We relaunched products, changed our positioning as a business, had to change CEO halfway through the year when our global CEO resigned. We've won loads of pitches and didn't lose any clients. But from a mental health perspective it's been a very difficult year. People have been very isolated. When you don't spend time with people, it makes you spend more time internalizing than you would if surrounded by people, and have more positive distraction. As a result



a much better mood when I go into the office than when working from home. A lot of people have lost their jobs and the economy is in a difficult place which will have a lasting effect on people. I worry about people a lot.

**How challenging has it been to maintain and grow professional relationships virtually?**

I've connected with all my local market CEOs in ways I wouldn't have before. We are a much more joined up network now. People have been able to connect with each other more emotionally, across borders. Previously, I would travel to all the different markets to spend time with a CEO and meet a few clients and that would take a whole week. Now, I have a conversation with all my CEOs in an hour. It's the same with a client pitch. When you're doing

needs of all the different people in the room without diluting the story you're trying to tell. On video you're able to cater more to people's needs through tech platforms. Of course, chemistry is hard to achieve in this way. But it's now all about how you use tech platforms as creatively as you can and that's an interesting challenge. The world has changed, less budget will be on travel and more on technology.

### **What enforced changes from this year will remain in 2021?**

With everything that's happened with Black Lives Matter this year, it's like finally companies have woken up to the importance of race, diversity and inclusion. I hope that's something that will remain a focus and not be a flash in the pan — the same with mental health. I also see the total shift to e-commerce

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something people want to do physically — but e-commerce will only continue to grow and digital advertising will also. In a [third-party] cookieless world, we will see less annoying ads following people around the internet, that [ad targeting] will come of age in a much more powerful way. There will be much better, reach-driven advertising. Context and out-of-home will also stay. In the retail space — similar to how office space needs to change — retail outlets will need to change to be more experiential — that's an ongoing transformation that's been accelerated because of Covid-19.

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more personal approach to the employer-employee relationship. Marketing chiefs this year faced the dual challenges of driving business during one of the worst global economic crises ever and reimagining the workplace to accommodate factors like social distancing and stay-at-home guidelines. On top of that: managing displaced, sometimes overburdened team members juggling home and work from the kitchen table.

— The pressure to be visible at all times that's been accentuated over the last nine months, has created an unhealthy culture in some agencies. The result is that many young executives no longer feel they can justify taking a sick day. "People feel guilty for not logging on at exactly 8.59 a.m, for not having enough meetings, for not



along with colleagues at 7 p.m.  
on a Friday night,” said Amy  
Kean, founder of Six Things  
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In 2020, virtually every industry across the globe was forced to adjust to new realities and reimagine old ways of doing business. Nowhere was this truer than in branded film and video production. As in-person gatherings became impossible, a vast array of professionals were forced to transform their casting efforts. Many casting professionals — especially [...]



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## As ad tech surges, challenges remain — and not just from the coronavirus pandemic

These are undoubtedly heady times for ad tech vendors. But it's important to be realistic about the future as 2021 unfolds economically.

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