
The WAM Programme and the world of work under the Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

2020 presented a challenging year for all sectors; education, retail, hospitality, the health service and also for employment. In 2020 the WAM programme, an initiative of AHEAD, was entering into its 15th year of collaborating with participating employers to provide paid and mentored internships for graduates with disabilities. However, it was a year like no other. The WAM programme had to be ready to respond to issues arising from the pandemic, to ensure our graduates with disabilities and employers continued to feel supported in the transition to remote-working. This article will look at how WAM responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges and learning and how it has really made everyone think about the world of work.

Revising the Needs Assessment Process

Initially in March 2020, as the Government announced closures and encouraged employers to enable their workforce to work safely from home, WAM had a number of graduates who were currently working in a variety of employers across both the public the private sector. A key component of all placements was a needs assessment specific to the job and the work environment. With the move to a different work environment, i.e. working from home, it was necessary to check in with all managers and graduates to ascertain whether revised needs assessments needed to take place. While the majority of workplace accommodations for WAM graduates are mainly related to work tasks; for some graduates with disabilities, accommodations such as hardware relating to monitors, chairs, footrest etc. are required. With the move to remote-working, sometimes these accommodations relating to hardware or work set-ups were not transferred, as all the equipment was based on the employer's site. In these cases, WAM advocated and liaised with the employers to ensure the equipment used in the office could be brought home. This was a reasonable accommodation relating to the individual's disability, as required under employment equality legalisation.

In June, WAM were preparing to support new incoming graduates who would be commencing their placement in a remote environment and it was necessary for us to revise the needs assessment process. Typically, the assessment would consist of a face to face meeting with the graduate on-site, to allow for audit of workspaces or look at health and safety considerations in the workplace. During this process, both the manager and mentor of the graduate also undergo pre-placement training and a briefing is conducted with the manager on recommendations from the needs assessment. However, with strict public health restrictions in place and the majority of staff working from home, conducting assessments and training on site was not possible for the most part and so our needs assessment process moved online using Zoom and we developed a new policy in relation to this.

In addition, our documentation was reviewed to include a section on remote working where we had to ascertain more detail in relation to the type of software the company was using to communicate with their teams, how training was being delivered and their remote induction looked like. This allowed us to carefully consider what type of support the graduate may need while working remotely.

Support graduates on placement

WAM conduct regular email check-ins with placed graduates however, being conscious that some graduates were isolated from their work colleagues, WAM decided to run regular online check-in meetings every three weeks via Zoom. The purpose of these meetings was twofold: to create a space where graduates can interact with each other, and to provide them with an opportunity to air any issues they may be having in relation to working from home. We started running these meetings at the end of April and have been running them ever since. Some key learning we took away from these meetings was as follows:

- Time management and adhering to deadlines in a remote-work environment -there could be issues with regard to the home set-up, for example, in shared accommodation or managing childcare and home-schooling
- Starting a new job remotely was challenging, particularly in the first few weeks where all of the training was conducted via sharing screens etc. Graduates shared experiences about how they stayed connected with colleagues on a remote basis and tips for managing workloads at the beginning.
- Technical issues were prevalent for a lot of graduates in terms of learning new software and accessing certain elements of their work.

Overall, we found that as time went on, WAM graduates were acting as a peer support group for each other. The more frequently the meetings happened, the WAM team took a step back from leading the discussion. This opportunity to connect with other WAM graduates was not something that had happened in the past and going forward, it is something that WAM will implement on a permanent basis.

Recruitment

Naturally the pandemic caused uncertainty for a lot of organisations and companies, and recruitment for WAM placements was impacted upon. Several companies implemented hiring freezes due to a variety of reasons such as increased costs in facilitating and supporting current employees to work from home, loss of revenue for their businesses due to the pandemic, but most of all it was the uncertainty as to how best induct or on-board new hires on a remote basis, even more so for people with disabilities.

As a response to this, WAM developed a wealth of resources on a range of topics freely available on the AHEAD website in addition to running monthly webinars, known as [WAMinars](#) on issues relating to the pandemic. WAM adjusted and added additional information to our pre-placement training to include information relating to remote working and best practices in terms of how to induct and manage employees with a disability remotely.

Remote Working Resources for Employers

A new section was added to the AHEAD website specifically targeted at employers who wanted information regarding remote working, virtual recruitment and accessibility. You can find this webpage here -

<https://ahead.ie/wam-remoteworking-resources>

Virtual Workplace

As a virtual workplace was new for the majority of us, this section was aimed at employers who wished to gain a better understanding of some of the challenges in the workplace and also for our WAM managers and mentors on how we at WAM are adapting to the virtual workplace. A section on minding the mental health of employees is also included in this.

Virtual Recruitment and Virtual Meetings

As the majority of recruitment and meetings were being held online and not face-to-face, we provided information on how best to conduct virtual interviews and produced a handy Top 10 Tip guide for employers.

A guide was produced on how successfully to bring on board new employees remotely to the organisation, which includes a step by step breakdown beginning prior to the start date, the first day and the settling in period.

With many employers now conducting online meetings through a variety of platforms, we explained the accessibility of different platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, MS Teams, Skype and GoogleMeet. We also produced a guide on Online Meeting Etiquette, and how best to manage and run online meetings.

Accessibility

This page was specifically developed to capture good accessibility practices in relation to creating Microsoft Word Documents and PowerPoint Presentations and included webinar presentations from colleagues in AHEAD. Details of what and when captioning and Irish Sign Language Interpreting should be provided and how to source both of these accessibility requirements that employees who are deaf or hard of hearing may request while in the workplace.

AT Hive

This was developed by AHEAD's eLearning and Digital Media Officer and contains a guide to the wide range of different assistive technology (AT) options available and to increase awareness of AT in both education and the workplace.

In conclusion

Needless to say, it has been a busy year for us in WAM, responding to the challenges that the pandemic presented. However, both WAM and AHEAD have had the opportunity to reflect and learn from these challenges, and have been able to use the experience to shape our work going forward.



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Caroline oversees AHEAD's projects relating to the transition to employment for students and graduates with disabilities, namely GetAHEAD and The WAM Programme which is a work placement programme. Caroline holds qualifications in Deaf Studies, Irish Sign Language Teaching and Equality Studies. Caroline has over 14 years' experience of working and volunteering within the disability sector and various organisations within the Deaf community where she is currently Chairperson of the Sign Language Interpreting Service funded by the Citizens Information Board.

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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
