

SHAPING OUR NEW NORMAL: AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY TO REIMAGINE A MORE INCLUSIVE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKPLACE

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Key Takeaways

- International development professionals are seeking better work-life balance, challenging norms around the work-centric lifestyle prevalent in the industry. In tandem, they are seeking flexibility in the workplace in terms of their location and working hours. Women and racial or ethnic minority professionals are likely to demonstrate a greater preference towards these trends – a reflection of the social and economic structures that have driven COVID-19's uneven effects.
- In addition, mid-career and senior-career professionals, especially those based in headquarters offices, are desiring less travel compared to their pre-COVID levels. Many attributed this change to witnessing local staff's abilities to lead development programming in lieu of international staff during the last two years.
- As implementing partners (IPs) plan for the post-pandemic future, they need to capitalize on these workplace shifts to better promote staff well-being and to accelerate their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. Returning to business-as-usual will likely result in growing employee departures, with women and minority professionals comprising a larger proportion. Moreover, IPs will also need to be more intentional about understanding how new ways of working (e.g. hybrid or flexible hours) affect their staff differently to ensure that they do not unintentionally amplify existing drivers of exclusion. Finally, IPs will need to consider how to take the experience of the last two years and formally transfer capacity and authority to local staff.
- Promoting better balance, advancing DEI, and fostering locally led development – such efforts should not be the onus of IPs alone. Donor agencies, such as USAID, also play an important role in challenging and correcting some of the long-standing assumptions and inequities in our industry.

Introduction

From the transition to a virtual working environment to the halt in international travel, COVID-19 has profoundly altered the international development workplace. Our [earlier study](#) demonstrated that the pandemic was exacerbating existing inequalities in our sector, and therefore jeopardizing the diversity – at least gender-wise – of our future leaders as well as the broader pipeline of talent.

In this [follow-up study](#), we documented international development professionals' shifting perspectives on their careers, some seismic and some subtle, that resulted from the pandemic. We also explored the implications of these changes as they relate to the future diversity of the talent pipeline in international development programs. Finally, we observed to what extent and how implementing partners (IPs) are aligning with and responding to these shifts, and how they are navigating the threats to DEI gains that the pandemic has posed.

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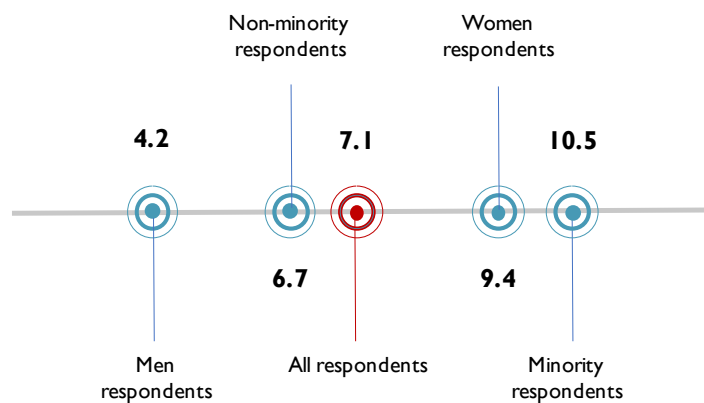
Findings

Finding 1: The pandemic inspired professionals to turn away from a work-centric lifestyle, challenging the overworked culture of the development industry.

The survey asked respondents to select what they believed to be the top three attributes in an employer prior to the pandemic and currently (Figure 1). The results signaled a major change, with development professionals now valuing work-life balance as their number one attribute, replacing meaningful job content and financial compensation.

Professionals' new prioritization of work-life balance was consistent after disaggregating by gender, racial or ethnic minority status, presence of dependents, and work location. That said, women and racial or ethnic minorities demonstrated greater change in this psychological shift, signaling the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on these groups.

Figure 1. Shifts in prioritizing work-life balance



Figures indicate percentage points

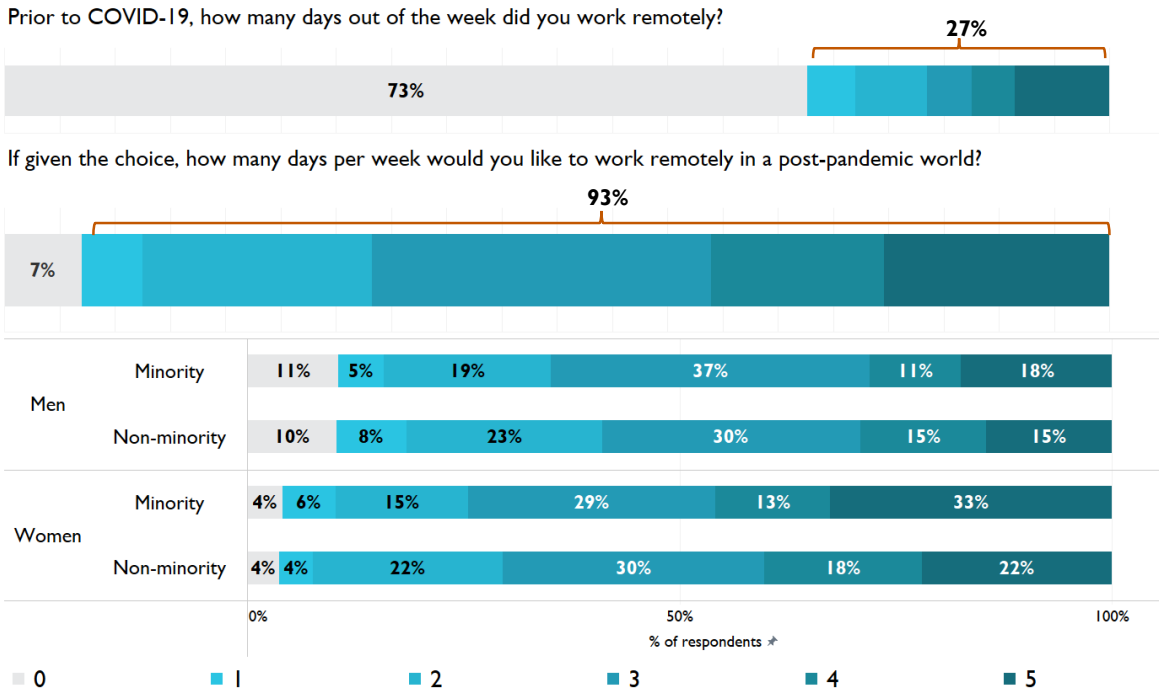
Over the last two years, most IPs' responses to the pandemic have centered on short-term, practical public-health priorities and IPs have not addressed the root issues of unmanageable workloads and burnout. Unless IPs invest in their staff's well-being and remain mindful of how the overworked culture is affecting different segments of their workforce, they will face a growing number of employee departures. Concerningly, given the survey results above, these departures may comprise a higher number of women and minority professionals, unraveling many of the DEI gains made in the industry.

Finding II: Development professionals are demanding permanent flexible and remote-work arrangements.

The survey responses revealed that COVID-19 precipitated a favorable shift in development professionals’ attitudes toward flexible work arrangements (Figure 2). While most employees prefer a hybrid work arrangement, when disaggregating by respondent characteristics, there were noticeable disparities in preferences. Women and racial or ethnic minorities, and especially minority women (33%), were more likely to want fully offsite arrangements.

Women professionals stated that a fully remote arrangement would allow them to better meet their domestic obligations, including caring for their spouses, elderly family members, and/or their children. This is not surprising, given that domestic responsibilities fall disproportionately on women around the world. Minority professionals indicated that fully remote work was about more than preferred flexibility. It was a way to ease the pain points around their work experience and career progression opportunities by avoiding racism, microaggressions, witnessing systemic discrimination, and the psychological fatigue of being the non-dominant voice in the workplace.

Figure 2. Remote work preferences



As IPs plan for their future workplace arrangements, they must consider the DEI implications of their decisions. They may risk losing women and minority employees should they return to a fully onsite model. At the same time, both hybrid and fully offsite settings can inadvertently amplify drivers of exclusion and must be managed with a DEI lens to counter such effects.

Finding III: The pandemic has created opportunities to advance locally led development.

The suspension of international travel triggered introspection, particularly from mid-career and senior-career professionals (Figure 3), on how they can reduce carbon footprints, achieve greater work-life balance, and promote locally led development efforts. In particular, mid-career and senior-career professionals based in headquarters stated that the pandemic had upended assumptions about what can be done virtually after witnessing how programs have been able to continue regardless of international professionals’ presence in the operating countries.

Figure 3. Change in desired travel levels from pre-COVID times



Figures represent average percentage point difference between future desired levels of work travel and actual pre-COVID levels, which were calculated as a percentage of one's overall job.

The reduced physical presence of international aid professionals during the pandemic did shift responsibilities to local leadership – a “happy accident” that may have resulted in knowledge transfer and the establishment of new operational processes. While the pandemic forced some elements of locally led development to unfold naturally, interviews with local staff suggested that these shifts are likely to be temporary unless there is explicit intentionality to sustain them. Local professionals stated that while they have gained additional responsibilities during the pandemic, they did not perceive them as opportunities for career advancement, especially when they were not tied to any promotions, credit, or formal decision-making authority.

Our study suggests there is renewed momentum among development professionals and IPs in promoting locally led development, and they embrace the latest initiatives announced by USAID. As travel restrictions ease, IPs will need to navigate their employees’ swell of support for localization and consider how this affects their business models, including how to transfer capacity and decision-making power to local staff; how they recruit, advance, and retain their local staff; and how this may signal changing roles for other staff.

How Can We Seize Our Moment?

As our industry begins to explore what our “new normal” will look like, we have an unprecedented opportunity to lay the foundation for a more empathetic, equitable, and inclusive sector. Indeed, our findings suggest that opportunities for reimagination abound, and that the development industry is experiencing a rare convergence of attention, energy, and resources to propel and institutionalize social values that development professionals find important.

Get Started: Commitment



A critical first step is for IPs to recognize, understand, and address the impact of COVID-19 on their workforce. IPs must unpack how the pandemic has exposed the fault lines of inequality across various factors, including gender, ethnicity, and location, within their own organizations and what the potential repercussions are for the well-being, morale, commitment, and diversity of their staff.

Go Further: Accountability



As IPs strategize their future of work, they should hold themselves accountable to foster a healthier and more inclusive workforce. They can formulate their own principles and values, or they can sign onto existing pledges such as the Coalition for Racial and Ethnic Equity in Development’s (CREED) Racial and Ethnic Equity pledge or InterAction’s DEI Compact.

Moreover, these principles must be embedded into their organizations. To promote well-being, for example, they can enact policies and practices to ensure their workers truly feel off the clock. But more importantly, IPs will need to revisit their staffing models to ensure allocated workloads align with standard working hours. In practical terms, this may translate to opportunities to attract and invest in additional and more local staff to distribute the workload. For USAID, it will require a rethinking of staffing structures within programs and activities and recognizing that lean teams can impact their diversity, which in turn, can impact program quality.

To advance DEI efforts, IPs need to ensure inclusive recruitment strategies and accountability measures, such as embedding DEI in performance reviews or succession plans. In addition, IPs need to be intentional about integrating DEI into the organizational culture. For example, using a simple tactic like “Say My Name” – where all employees must learn to say their colleagues’ names without the fear of mispronunciation is a signal of openness, learning, and cohesion.

Dig Deeper: Systemic Change



Shaping a better development workforce requires a hard examination of the unconscious biases and mental models that permeate our industry, and how these standards are reinforced in our policies, practices, and interactions to marginalize groups of individuals. We must unpack the deep-rooted dynamics within the

development sector and answer uncomfortable questions around the root causes of our challenges, such as:

- What does our overworked culture say about the attributes we prize in our industry? To what extent are those attributes universal?
- Why should we prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- What does a diverse, equitable, and inclusive development workforce structure look like? Should there be objectives and benchmarks, and can they be standardized?
- What are the underlying power dynamics and cultural norms in our industry that DEI is looking to dismantle?

Answers to these questions will help identify and address the root causes of our challenges and create the space for addressing them in a holistic and sustained manner. To that end, IPs cannot and must not go it alone. IPs, donors, and other stakeholders are part of an interwoven tapestry, and each have roles to play in challenging and correcting some of the long-standing assumptions and inequities in our industry. Donors' (like USAID) continued awareness, commitment, and expectations around DEI (as evidenced by the appointment of USAID's [Chief Diversity Officer](#) and [Equity Action Plan](#)) are more important than ever. Through collective action, the international development sector can find a way forward to truly build back better.