

# Don't let panic get in the way of good decision making

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Julie is a diversity and inclusion specialist with over 18 years' experience in the public and voluntary sector. At Acas she's responsible for leading and providing expert advice to build an inclusive culture. She also leads on employee health and wellbeing.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, Acas has seen a dramatic spike in calls to our helpline and visits to our website. People up and down the country are struggling through unprecedented change, personal and financial uncertainties, feelings of anxiety or fear for their loved ones – and trying to juggle them all while being the best parent, employer, colleague or daughter they can be.

Sadly, we have sometimes seen this anxiety give way to decisions which may be on the verge of discrimination.

## Decisions made in panic

Our helpline advisers have heard about:

- pregnant workers not being provided with suitable work, not getting risk assessments, or being suspended (but not on full pay)
- disabled workers not being provided with reasonable adjustments, such as homeworking
- older workers being invited to take unpaid leave

Often these decisions are made in panic. Forgetting that while the world has changed, employment law has not gone away.

Women, people with disabilities, ethnic minority groups and older workers are more likely to be in roles that may not be conducive to home working, or on part-time, temporary or zero-hours contracts. In every recession these groups fare worse and end up paying a 'recession tax'. And even those in otherwise 'secure' employment seem to be seen as disposable as bosses make panic decisions.

Research carried out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that women are about one-third more likely than men to work in a sector that has been heavily affected or entirely shut down due to the pandemic, such as the retail and hospitality industries. In addition, women still bear the majority of caring responsibilities for both children and older relatives.

## Making sure you do not discriminate

So as the UK starts to move into a post lockdown phase, what can we do to ensure the actions we take in relation to the government's upcoming guidelines for getting back to work safely do not inadvertently lead to potential discrimination?

### Employers

Take a step back before making snap decisions in relation to the upcoming guidance for getting back to work safely and think about what you would do normally. The government's job retention scheme has given you the breathing space to think about what is best for your business and your workers.

## **Employees**

Think about your rights, and what adjustments you need to be effective in your role or to make it safe for you to return to work.

## **Talk to each other**

Recognise this is a scary time for us all, and people may not be responding normally because of their own stress levels.

If your organisation values your people, then it's essential that it does not go down the one-size-fits-all strategy as this could have longer term impacts on your workforce, your reputation, and your ability to retain and attract diverse talent in the future.

There is a raft of [advice on the Acas website](#) on employment legislation, including [discrimination, bullying and harassment guidance](#).

You can also read [coronavirus guidance on avoiding discrimination against employees with protected characteristics from the Equality and Human Rights Commission](#).