

*“Allowing people to work remotely would give publishers a bigger employee pool to create a more inclusive workplace.”*

## Publishing Needs to Face Its Ableism Problem

The communications manager of We Need Diverse Books asks that publishers continue to allow employees to work from home after the Covid-19 outbreak fades

BY ALAINA LEARY

“This is not a remote position. Candidates are expected to perform work on-site in our office,” is a line that I look for in every job posting before I decide whether or not to apply. I’m disabled; I have Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and I’m autistic, and working remotely is a reasonable accommodation that I need to do my job.

Up until the Covid-19 pandemic, most book publishing jobs have required employees to work in the office with little room for remote flexibility. Now the same publishers who denied disabled and chronically ill people the ability to work from home are requesting that their staff do just that. Accommodations to work remotely are prioritized when public health issues affect everyone, including nondisabled staff, but are deemed impossible when the request comes from a disabled employee.

While there are definitely functions in publishing that can’t be performed entirely remotely, such as warehouse jobs and production jobs, the pandemic has made it clear many tasks can be completely or at least partially remote if publishers allow them to be. Over half of American workers could work from home at least some of the time, according to an analysis of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics by research firm Global Workplace Analytics.

If there’s a lesson that publishers can learn from this pandemic, it’s that our industry needs more remote-friendly opportunities if we want to address the widespread ableism and inequality in publishing. We need more remote opportunities in book publishing. Of 166 recent job listings for positions at Hachette, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Scholastic, and Simon & Schuster, only two specify that they are open to remote candidates, and one of those two is a contract position, not a full- or part-time job.

Not offering remote-friendly opportunities widens the ongoing diversity gap in publishing. According to Lee & Low’s “2019 Diversity in Publishing Baseline Survey,” 89% of those working in publishing are nondisabled, 76% are white, 97% are cisgender, and 81% are straight. Many publishers are based in New York City, where only one in five subway stations are wheelchair accessible and average rents for a one-bedroom apartment are \$3,000 per month, according to the “Zumper National Rent Report.” Glassdoor puts the national average salary for an editorial assistant

at \$43,761, making it difficult to live on in New York. More than 400,000 disabled employees regularly work from home, so allowing people to work remotely would give publishers a bigger employee pool to create a more inclusive workplace.

Common advice for those pursuing careers in publishing who can’t work in an office or can’t afford to move for a job is to freelance. Copyediting, proofreading, book reviewing, and sensitivity reading are areas where contract work is common. According to Lee & Low’s diversity survey, 19% of book reviewers identify as disabled, while in most other areas of publishing it’s closer to 10%.

While being self-employed can be an empowering choice for some, it shouldn’t be the only way that people who need to work remotely can get a job in publishing. Disabled and chronically ill people are more likely to need the benefits, including health insurance and paid sick time, that independent contractors don’t have access to. Many disabled people struggle to find full- or part-time jobs. Only 19% of people with disabilities in the U.S. are employed, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and disabled people are more likely to be self-employed than nondisabled people.

According to Lee & Low’s survey, the most diverse members of the publishing workforce are interns. Of the interns surveyed in 2019, 49% identify as black, indigenous, and people of color; 49% are LGBTQ; and 22% identify as having a disability. The higher diversity among interns than the general publishing workforce may be because internships are more likely to be at least partly remote, or because publishers are partnering with organizations like We Need Diverse Books to provide grants for interns. The question is whether those interns will continue to work in publishing. Will they be retained and promoted to leadership roles? Will publishers allow them to work remotely if they’re unable to afford to stay in New York or need an accommodation for a disability?

The Covid-19 pandemic is changing the way we work. Moving forward, the publishing industry needs to better value its disabled and marginalized employees by expanding remote opportunities and thereby making publishing an industry for all. ■



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