

Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Managing Teams Remotely

We expect many things to go back to normal once the COVID-19 pandemic is truly over. Restaurants, flights, and entertainment venues will eventually recover, although operations may change. However, not everyone's work-life will return to the pre-pandemic status quo.

Some workplaces will continue to embrace the remote work model because they find that it works for them. The consulting firm, Global Workplace Analytics (GWA), estimates that 56% of the workforce holds a compatible job (at least partially) with remote work.¹ It is predicted that the longer work from home protocols continue, the greater the adoption we will see when the dust of the global pandemic settles. Doing so can pay incredible dividends, too.

Research finds that employees who occasionally work remotely are "more likely to feel engaged in their jobs than those who never work remotely."² By working from home, some individuals have saved up to \$4,000 annually with optimal considerations,³ while the businesses that employ them save about \$11,000 per year for every employee they shift to remote work status.⁴ The immediate savings result from increased productivity and reduced turnover, but regardless, it's safe to say that more people will work remotely from now on.

This article will explore ways to optimize working conditions for individuals who find themselves working at home more often. We will use recent data to answer common questions about trust, productivity, engagement, and mental health for remote teams.

What the numbers say about the remote work experience

In June and July 2020, a group of 1,388 people working from home were asked for their impressions of the experience.

As it turns out, the new arrangement suits many of them.

- 91% reported better work-life balance
- 79% reported more focus and better productivity. (Another set of 10,000 employees surveyed by the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago say the same.)
- 78% reported that they felt less stress.
- About 27% said they would have considered working from home ideal even before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 80% said they would like to continue working remotely for at least three days of the week once the pandemic is over.
- Many said they would prefer remote work all five days of the workweek.

How to overcome the challenges of working remotely

For all of the advantages of remote work, there are challenges. Here are some of the most common complexities teams encounter when switching to remote work and virtual communications.

Trust

One hurdle with remote work is building and maintaining the trust that the job will get done on time and that each person will meet both individual and organization goals. Managers may find it challenging to switch from measuring employee performance by attendance to measuring performance against key performance indicators. When managers let go of micromanagement in remote work situations, people tend to be happier, more productive, and perceive more work-life balance.

Research shows that managers who also work from home are more likely to endorse it for others. Due to the first-hand experience working from home, they worry less about lost productivity, know how to use virtual tools for collaboration and delegation, and enjoy the benefits of less commuting and fewer workplace interruptions.

Communication

Communication breakdowns occur in all work environments, but when the team is separated and working virtually, those breakdowns can increase due to technology and systems failures. Communication tools are essential to remote teams. Some initial considerations will help guide you in finding the right balance of software and tools, and employing an appropriate number of communication tools matters as well. Too few tools limit coworkers' access to each other, while too many apps can make communications unmanageable, fragmented and confusing.

Focus and accountability

The breakdown of accountability tends to occur when communication isn't clear or concise, but there are a few tactics you may incorporate to keep employees productive and goal-oriented. Establishing daily, weekly, and quarterly expectations is essential for accountability. Unspoken rules, quotas, and expectations often create confusion. Set your team members up for success by communicating and ensuring a common understanding of expectations. Each person and manager should know each key performance indicator for which they are responsible. Without remote work policies that include performance benchmarks, disconnections can form between employees, supervisors, and all parties' goals.

Life

With people spending more time working from home, it's reasonable to assume that household tasks like taking care of children, parents and day to day activities tend to seep into the workday. Since the start of the pandemic and work from home integrations, household distractions, such as slow internet connections and individuals working odd hours have been frustrating for managers. Such distractions can be a dampener on collaboration and innovation in a remote working environment.

Encourage your team members to create a dedicated space for an at-home office—whatever that looks like where they live—an area free from distractions where possible. Additionally, have each one maintain a daily schedule in an open-access forum like Google Calendar or Microsoft Teams so that their colleagues know when they are "online" and available for communication and interaction.

How to maintain employee engagement and motivation from afar

Once you have established a workflow and have ironed out some of the common wrinkles mentioned above, the focus should be on maintaining employee engagement and motivation. How does a manager do this from a distance and/or virtually?

Today's remote communication platforms offer slick collaboration tools that allow conversations to flow like everyone's together in the same room, but with the added benefit of allowing 'Do Not Disturb' functions to dampen chatter during tasks that require deep focus. Over time, you will learn whether your team members prefer to communicate by text or voice, or perhaps another option. Use this learning and your short and long-term goals to strategize your employee engagement game plan.

Suppose your goal is to build a connected and open environment that replicates the office space you once inhabited. In that case, you might want to create employee opportunities and respond to feedback. This is enormously valuable in strengthening motivation and building relationships centered around trust and empowerment.⁵

Hands-on courses and workshops may be on hold, but if your goal is to educate your team, there are many online learning portals that utilize virtual education tools to teach groups.

Long-term, your goal may be employee retention and building trust within your workforce. For this, you may dedicate an internal communication channel to casual banter or thematic chats. Still, many online tools allow you to schedule game days, and virtual team activities, one example, virtual yoga sessions. You can even book a chef to teach the team how to prepare a favourite dish, all in their respective home kitchens.



The importance of frequent group interactions

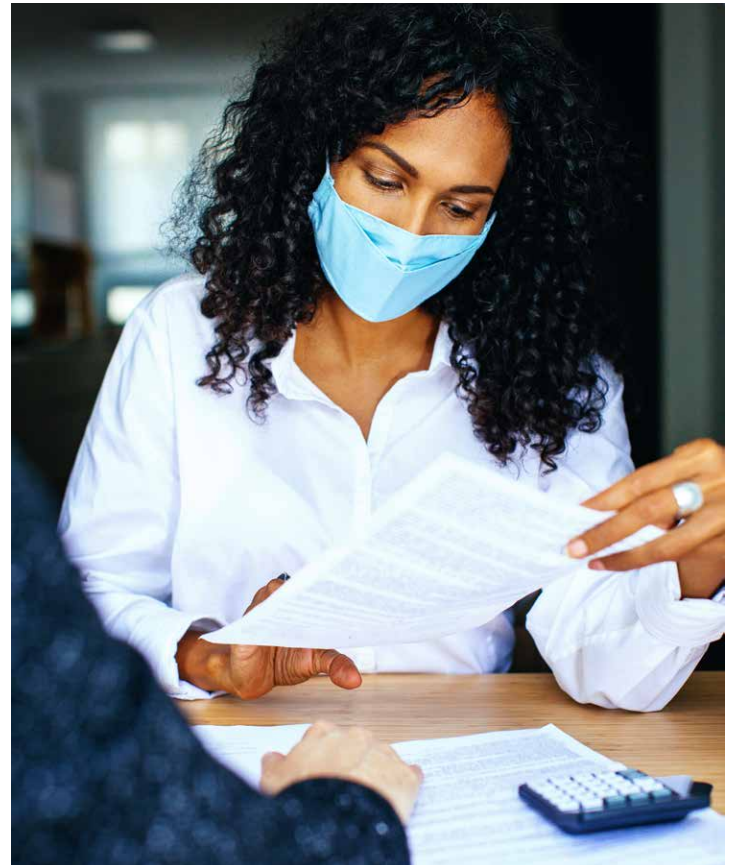
Humans are social beings, and it is essential for us—even the introverts—to be among other people in a social manner. For some people, colleagues are an integral part of their social life. For those individuals, the COVID-19 pandemic may have had created additional feelings of loneliness and isolation. However, there are ways for managers of remote teams to conduct interactions that focus on group dynamics.

A key strategy to maintain employee engagement is to facilitate virtual company-wide meetings. Regular meetings that include representation from the entire organization are beneficial to employee retention and overall productivity. Use these interactions to help deepen the connections the members of your team have with each other. It's also essential to occasionally sponsor casual or non-work related virtual hangouts to ensure all workers feel like they are an important person within the organization's culture. Consider opening the virtual hangout for a large organization to include break-out rooms for team challenges, Q&A sessions with star managers, and coffee chats about exciting projects.

COVID-19, and all of the workplace disruptions it has caused, will not soon be forgotten. Businesses continue to maneuver the evolving impact of the pandemic and adopt key lessons and learnings. Organizations and managers who were not prepared, will know what worked and what didn't work and will be compelled—by leaders to close communication gaps, building a more resilient and prepared workforce to face crisis scenarios in the future.

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