COVID-19: Virtual workplaces, the new norm

Could remote working be the new normal for work workplaces? We're getting a taste of what that looks and feels like right now.

As we publish this article, a coronavirus called Covid-19 is evading containment around the world.[1] The fast-spreading virus is causing many employers to switch to remote working with employees staying home. The move to socially distance and isolate is a bid to "flatten the curve" and stop the virus from spreading to an even more unmanageable point.[2] What sounds like the plot to a thriller is a chance to explore the strength of our communication, discipline and self-care skills while attempting to produce a continuing amount of career successes from our comfortable, and somewhat, distraction-filled homes.

How will we deal with it? What happens if we experience economic and productivity slow downs? How can we be as productive working from home? These questions are top of mind for many of us. This article is all about the advantages of having a remote workforce, and the key factors employers and managers must consider for their virtual work environments to be successful.

Advantages to working in a virtual environment

In the case of a global health crisis, when conditions are worsening and the risk of infection increasing, we need to slow the spread of disease as quickly as possible. Working from home is one of the best ways to protect your workforce.

Beyond the immediate, there are a number of benefits to working remotely that you may discover and enjoy during this time.

1. A properly functioning remote workspace should help workers get critical tasks done without the usual office distractions and pressures.

2. Being able to control the environment we work in allows us to adjust the "tone" of the space (vibrant, or cozy, or minimalist) until it becomes a place that puts us in a productivity mindset each time we enter.

3. At least one peer-reviewed study shows a link between a worker's sense of autonomy and job satisfaction. Those who feel more in control of their work lives associated with informal flexibility and working at home tend to remain with their companies for longer durations and feel less stressed.[3]

4. In a separate report from Owl Labs, findings show that remote workers are not only happier and more engaged, but they're 13% more likely to stay at their current job for the next five years than their office-bound counterparts.[4]

5. Commuting takes up a lot of time, is expensive (even public transport), causes a lot of avoidable stress at the beginning and end of the day, and contributes to the pollution of our planet. Enjoy more free time and no lines when you work at home.

6. With more time and access to the home, it is more comfortable (with practice) to strike a work-life balance while working remotely as compared to what is achievable within a traditional workplace. Take a break, prepare your meals, and engage in some afternoon stretching or exercise without reducing your productivity. Done consciously, you may find that engaging in healthy alternative activities during the day increases, rather than disrupts, your productivity.

What must employers, leaders and team managers consider?

We've identified four of the most important considerations for employees who must transition to remote working conditions.

1. The health and safety of your employees always come first; productivity comes second.

2. In the case of an ongoing public health crisis such as this, it is critical to comply with guidance from the World Health Organization and regional ministries of health. Placing your employees' health first is the responsible thing to do. It's a critical component to ensure that we don't overburden healthcare systems in times of crisis.

3. Communicate to the point of over-communicating when it comes to delegating tasks, organizing team meetings, and updating the team on the company's latest decisions regarding the current crisis.

4. Allow your employees to take home what's essential to maintain reasonable productivity at home. You can create a "work from home hardware" form in Google Docs so that employees can sign out the hardware from the office (from their desk only, unless otherwise authorized) while keeping track of that hardware.

What do employees need to know?

In challenging times, employees need to think about their health and safety first. Once their well-being is considered, then comes staying effective and productive as an organization, with the ultimate aim of coming out the other side in good shape. Here's what employees need to know when entering a phase of required isolation and remote working.

1. Do not panic, even if you fall ill. Seasonal illnesses may present themselves that have nothing to do with the pandemic illness. Though you may not need immediate medical attention, you should call your doctor to report the illness. Once you've done that, check in with your HR department or supervisor to update your current status (ill, not ill, self-isolating, etc.) with that part of the team.

2. In the case of a pandemic like Covid-19, Health Canada will provide a list of tips, like staying away from family members who are vulnerable or who have underlying health conditions, covering your coughs, and washing your hands afterward and frequently.[5] If you live with other people, you should regularly clean high traffic zones and the communal surfaces often touched doorknobs, faucet handles, toilets, remote controls and the like with a household disinfectant or soapy water.

3. Find your perfect workflow. With some willpower and a steady routine, any worker can learn to overlook distractions around the house. Turn this period into an opportunity for self-reflection and discovery. Since you have control over your surroundings, make adjustments each day that benefits your ability to focus on tasks for long periods. You will find that there's a right way and a wrong way to set up your ideal office. You may find some insights that you can implement in your employer's work environment.[6] Keep natural light top of mind as it plays an important role in maintaining a positive outlook.

Whether you have done it in the past or not, you can and will survive working remotely. You may have different needs than your co-workers when it comes to technical issues or emotional support. Always ask for what you need, and make sure your requests are being heard and addressed. The remote office may not last for most of those who are self-isolating, however, it can be a positive and rewarding experience.[7] Beyond the health benefits, monetary savings and reduced carbon footprint more, your participation is having a positive influence on reducing the risk of infection and the overall recovery.

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Tips and Tricks for Remote Working Conditions

Some conditions force workplaces to have employees work from home. It may not seem ideal, but with some adjustments, there is a way to support employees in the transition to help them stay productive in unusual circumstances. Right now, that circumstance happens to be a coronavirus called Covid-19 that has proven itself to be wildly contagious and dangerous to at-risk populations. Workplaces all over the globe are encouraging (or forcing) employees to telecommute when possible to help "flatten the curve" and dampen the spread of the virus.[1]

As a safe, open, and social country, social distancing may be one of the most challenging things Canadians will do.[2] Still, experts insist that the diminishing the impact this flu will have on our healthcare system compared to harder-hit countries is worth the isolation.[3] The truth is that this may not be the last time we are called upon to practice safe socializing. It is wise for workplaces to create a system now that can be replicated, where technology helps replace the need for face-to-face contact and productivity is not lost for lack of focus and communication.

The most important thing for managers to remember is that no matter the reason for these remote working conditions: safety is the first consideration; productivity is always second.

With that in mind, we have devised an article full of tips for managers who need to transition to temporary remote working conditions without a drastic decline in productivity.

1. Set regular working hours that communicate "business per usual." If you typically have taken calls in the morning, or emailed clients in the evening, continue your usual operations as best as possible.

2. Plan and structure your workday. Try to group meetings and set aside chunks of time for individual tasks and email.

3. Unfortunately, emergencies present the perfect opportunities for cybercriminals to launch malicious campaigns. Be aware of this and pay special attention to safety measures (like using a VPN) when connecting to wifi and transferring sensitive data online.[4]

4. Give your employees what they need to create work-friendly environments at home by helping with laptops, keyboards, and cables from the office. If possible, someone from HR should be available to support employees through this transition and setup process. If you provide an in-office perk like free lunches, it is not necessary to provide a comparable service while employees are working from home.

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5. Make a point to go on-camera for virtual meetings when possible, and dress like you are in the office when you do so, to maintain the spirit of authority and professionalism, even if you are working from a comfortable home.

6. Over-communicate with anyone else that reports to you. There will be certain things that you need to communicate to your staff right away and other things that need regular update reports. Utilize your team's usual chat channels, additional Zoom calls, and any alternative ways of remaining in constant contact.[5] Keep one-on-one communications short, direct and to-the-point, while providing less frequent but more detailed updates to the entire team.

7. Do your employees have access to your schedule? Be vigilant about marking the times where you are "out of office" to prevent people from thinking you're unresponsive.

8. Be aware of your need for physical activity, rest, and social interactions. For many people, one of the hardest things about working in isolation from home is that they don't get the social interactions that are important for their happiness. Try to maintain a routine with breaks, balanced meals, exercise, self-care, and check-ins with your friends and loved ones.

9. Cancel all sports and physical activities, and other team activities, and notify your team of the changes. If your company regularly offers physical wellness activities, you should consider ways in which you can provide these services to remote workers. Subscriptions, class pass, online tutorials (free on Youtube), as well as gentle reminders to stretch, walk, jog, or get some fresh air and sun (if the state of emergency allows this) throughout the day.

10. Do not change your KPIs, sales targets, and goals. Keep striving for them! However, it would be best if you did not penalize your employees if they cannot meet their goals during a period of remote working, especially if

their clients and vendors are weathering the same storm as you.

11. Prioritizing work goals as much as possible should be the aim, but if an employee is working with kids at home, and this prevents them from working, please be open to switching such an individual to a partial workload.

12. The CDC has outlined methods for managing stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.[6] Some of these methods include: taking breaks from the 24-hour news cycle (and social media), eating healthy, getting exercise, making time to unwind, socializing however possible, and calling a healthcare provider "if stress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row." Check in with your team to make sure that, besides their workload, they are taking care of their physical and mental health, and make sure that you're doing the same.

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