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The Best Practices for Remote Work

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Edition

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Introduction

In February 2020 the novel coronavirus and COVID-19, the disease it causes, spread from China to the U.S. and other countries, severely restricting national and international travel. By March 11th the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. As a result of these developments, many organizations, agencies, and institutions restricted travel as well, and public health authorities recommended curtailing large-scale gatherings. Online and distance-based solutions were proposed and adopted, and in many places remote work is becoming the new norm. Managing the expectations and demands of this new workplace involves understanding and addressing unforeseen challenges and finding new and effective solutions; and adapting to this changing economic and social reality means that developing and honing remote work strategies will be increasingly essential.

Implications for Higher Education

As more cases of COVID-19 are reported, universities around the country are moving course online, canceling conferences and athletic seasons, and emptying their campuses. With the number of reported cases in the U.S. escalating daily, reports of connections to campuses have become more common. The crisis may have growing and lasting ramifications for years to come: financially devastating institutions, employees, and students; testing the strength of remote learning, and presenting a host of unanticipated challenges.

Universities are scrambling to address the outbreak and prepare for worse to come, responding to the pandemic in a variety of disruptive ways, such as changing grading policies to pass/fail, sending students home for the spring semester, and considering lay-offs of non-essential staff such as food-service workers. On March 1st the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued guidelines recommending American colleges and universities “consider postponing or canceling student foreign-exchange programs,” leaving universities and students uncertain how to respond.¹

¹ Staff. (2020 March 3). *The corona virus is upending higher ed. Here are latest developments*. Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-coronavirus-is-upending/248175>

Additionally, a large number of academic conferences have been cancelled, postponed, or converted to virtual gathering using videoconferencing technology. College athletics have also not escaped measures to contain the virus, with cancellations of tournaments becoming a major blow to athletic departments. The disruption to university enrollment processes has led to a chaotic admissions season, with many universities pushing back deposit deadlines, and confusion about how to handle international students.

On whole, the rapid spread of the coronavirus has exposed the hazards and vulnerabilities of an interconnected world, with universities often at the forefront of developing measures to combat the rise of the disease. But universities are not unique in developing efforts to combat the expansion of the virus's reach. The global workplace is also struggling to adapt to the public health crisis and formulating new solutions to maintain productivity.

Coronavirus Meets the Workplace

On March 4th, authorities at Facebook disclosed that a contractor in its Seattle office had been diagnosed with the coronavirus and mandated that all Seattle employees must work from home until March 31st. Alarm spread throughout the company, and it is not alone. Major businesses around the world—such as Microsoft, CNN, Amazon, and Ford—have begun putting emergency-response plans into action, ordering stringent safety measures, and implementing work-from-home protocols.

Such developments have made the modern workplace a battleground in the fight to contain the coronavirus, with many companies struggling to engineer wholly new and unforeseen solutions. As one small business owner noted in *The New York Times*, “No one has a playbook for this.”² Google has increased the amount of hand sanitizer available to employees, Uber urged its drivers to restrict all non-essential travel, and Citigroup and Twitter are restricting all nonessential employee travel.

² Isaac, M., Yaffe-Belany, D., and Wise, K. (2020 March 5). *Workplace vs. coronavirus: 'No one has a playbook for this.'* *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/business/coronavirus-offices-covid-19.html>

These and other measures taken in response to the coronavirus may have lasting effects on workplace regulations and behavior. Telecommuting has already become a favored practice, as has the use of technology for remote collaboration. Strategies to handle remote work for the near-term are becoming the norm, with lasting implications for the modern workplace.

Strategies for Remote Work

The reality of working from home is rapidly moving from an outlying precaution to a given in attempting to stem the spread of the coronavirus. Normal work patterns, communication standards, and established methods of teamwork and team dynamics will be disrupted and have to be reconsidered. The increasing instability, anxiety, and uncertainty about the economy and the unfolding crisis will make adapting to these changes even more challenging. But tools and methods exist that can ensure effective collaboration, productivity, and continuing effectivity.³

The first step in rethinking work strategies involves *spelling out goals and rules*—e.g. clarifying and re-clarifying desired outcomes and roles—whereby leaders can keep their teams focused on key priorities and communicate them effectively. Mapping skills and capacity is additionally essential to minimize the impact of the unexpected shock of remote work, as is considering how an organization has skills redundancy and how to access capacity from outside. New best practices involve making it clear to employees that they can count on leadership to help manage tensions that may arise from a changing flow and style of work.

Another step in making an effective transition to remote work involves leaders *making time for personal interactions*. Leaders must resist the urge to limit interactions to exclusively task-focused operations, as employees may increasingly feel disconnected and isolated. Additionally, keeping the whole team in mind and engaged rather than turning to favored employees is essential, as is scheduling regular meetings to avoid excluding staff who are too busy to join or are less accessible. Creating a virtual water cooler can allow setting aside time for personal updates and social interactions which can preserve a sense of team unity and camaraderie.

³ Gardner, H.K. and Matviak, I. (2020 March 5). *Coronavirus could force teams to work remotely*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/coronavirus-could-force-teams-to-work-remotely>

Humanizing connections through real-time media such as video conferencing is also advantageous.

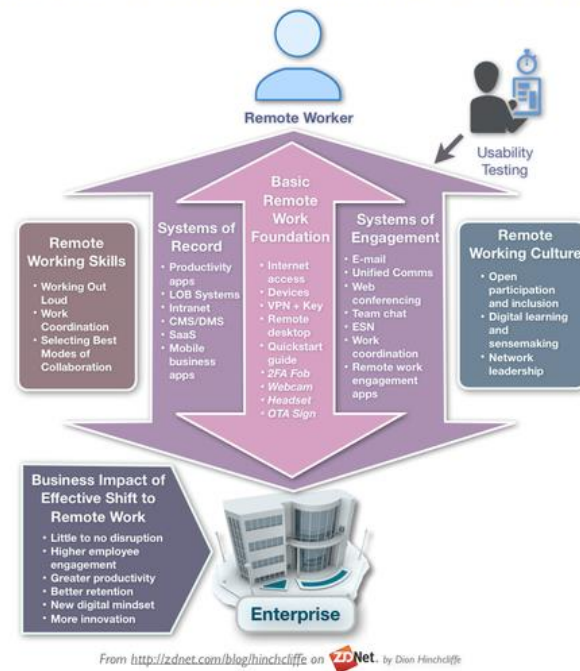
Lastly, *normalizing new work environments* can combat distractions and potential misunderstandings. For example, at the start of a project each team member could take a few minutes to show the team his or her workspace and share some personal context, thereby helping colleagues develop an appreciation for each other's work environment so they can be more sensitive to each other's constraints. Acknowledging non-traditional workspaces and keeping assumptions or stereotypes in check is also important, as the contextual ambiguity inherent in team members working from home can result in misplaced assumptions about focus and commitment to work.

With the coronavirus continuing the spread, work disruptions will continue to be inevitable. But effective responses can allow for continuity of successful operations, and opportunities for novel thinking can emerge. Exploring new ways of working and challenging old assumptions can benefit an organization in the long term.

Digital Approaches to a Changed Workplace

While working outside the office is increasingly standard practice, enabled by a host of digital tools, most organizations are still in the early stages, and there is considerable room for improvement in the digital employee experience working from home. Strategies exist that can significantly upgrade effectiveness while minimizing the impact of remote work on consumers, workers, and suppliers.

The Transformative Possibilities of Remote Working



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- 1) *Create a safe and effective foundation for remote digital access.* At its core, this means assuring secure access to IT resources and the internet itself. It is hazardous to assume employees have reliable and adequate online access at home. Having a clearly articulated remote work policy including a communications program, budget, training, and support is essential. Remote work devices must additionally be appropriate to the task and up to speed to meet the demands of working from home, and organizations must secure remote access to business assets and online services by employing a virtual private network (VPN).
- 2) *Provide access to productivity, line of business applications, and communications/collaboration tools.* As organizations today revolve around teamwork, using and maintaining access to shared knowledge assets such as files, reports, and spreadsheets is essential. Going the extra mile with remote collaboration means investing in digital communications and collaboration tools. Making remote work easier and more engaging can be key to continuing productivity. Employee skills must also be developed to take full advantage of novel digital capabilities, with both skills-building

⁴ Hinchcliffe, D. (2020 March 11). *Working in a coronavirus world: Strategies and tools for staying productive.* <https://www.zdnet.com/article/effective-strategies-and-tools-for-remote-work-during-coronavirus/>

software and traditional structured learning providing dual foundations for employee success.

- 3) *Develop remote working skills.* In practice, remote work takes a toll on established means of collaboration and social interactions. Yet key skills have emerged to make effective teamwork in the digital space possible. Employees narrating their work into digital tools through “working out loud” can help employees stay connected and engaged with each other and return positive aspects of the physical workspace through conversational interactions. Work coordination and using the right modes of collaboration are also key, as is adapting to decentralized working by spotting opportunities to take advantage of collaborative technologies and applying new knowledge to situations where no guidance is available.

- 4) *Cultivate a remote working culture and mindset.* Creating an environment which is more effective for remote work involves understanding how new digital tools shift the boundaries of what is possible, both for the individual employee and the organizational culture. Certain cultural and mindset changes can be enabled by the participatory nature of digital tools, including: greater open participation and inclusion; dedicating time for digital learning; and adapting network leadership. Teaching, learning, and involvement are 3 pillars of making remote work successful and building a more advanced digital culture that enables and supports new possibilities.

Many organizations will be tempted to simply replicate what worked in the office to working remotely. However, this would be a missed opportunity. An organization suffers if it changes technologies without also changing employees’ skills and habits. Despite the isolation of working from home, remote work may offer the opportunity to create a compelling new digital work environment that is more connected, participatory, and engaging than the past. In this transition, innovation will be essential through establishing new skills, shifting to a digital culture, and preparing for new challenges.

Best Practices for Video Conferencing

Due to the unprecedented rise in remote work, organizations are increasingly presented with the need for new work practices to meet the increase in demand for work-from-home options. These changes can necessitate the rapid redeployment of resources, demand technical

readiness, and prompt IT service desk preparations, changes in management operations, and adopting new technologies and communication plans.

Network readiness involves considering employees' collaboration traffic as part of remote network preparations. Optimizing this often problematic virtual private network (VPN) swell in digital interconnectivity means: restricting video use only to essential users or presenters to lower bandwidth usage; encouraging users to disconnect from their VPN as traffic is a concern during large events; directing traffic to the internet rather the VPN tunnel; and putting plans in place to accommodate users' needed bandwidth.

Audio management is additionally key. Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) allows employees to join meetings over their online network. In imperfect network conditions, users can connect using traditional phones, however high volumes of audio traffic may hamper telecom infrastructure, creating problems, especially in remote areas. For more control and less stress on networks, organizations can limit access to features like recording capabilities and video.

Video and device management is also essential, with many network administrators opting to set up employees with video devices in their homes. Cloud registering these devices can allow them to function from a user's home internet connection and be remotely managed. This can additionally provide real time analytics and diagnostics, as well as simplify employee onboarding. Proficient diagnostics and troubleshooting capabilities will also become a central element to any joint remote work endeavor. On whole, new remote work conditions demand updated strategies for assuring effectiveness and continuity of operations but can be achieved through savvy use of digital technology.⁵

Communications Essentials for Remote Teamwork

The increasing distance involved in the rise of remote work means that rethinking, nurturing, and maintaining strong work relationships will be an increasing challenge yet key aspect of effective organizations. Without the everyday face-to-face interactions of the traditional workspace, clear communication can be compromised, and it becomes difficult to understand the context of each person's situation. Developing new strategies for assuring connection and communication is imperative, and possible.

⁵ <https://www.webex.com/webexcovid19.html>

Building rapport remotely can feel unnatural, and traditional methods of supporting it can be limited in a remote working environment. But some standard, offline strategies for building connections can be applied to remote working. Placing time constraints on meeting someone new can ease the common feeling of being overwhelmed, and communication methods such as validating others with active listening and open-ended questions can be crucial.

Applying effective strategies for communication through text is also a central element of rapport-building. In a remote setting it becomes critical to get one's point across clearly, efficiently, and succinctly while showing empathy and understanding. To this end, employees should be mindful of certain communication dynamics and necessities.

With teammates working at a distance, digital traffic such as team chats and full inboxes can become the norm, which make finding methods of keeping on top of work situations and staying up to date imperative for effective communication. One approach is setting up archive lists where otherwise irrelevant emails can be CC'd to. If an employee is setting up a meeting, for example, this avoids flooding everyone's inboxes with unnecessary chatter, yet allows for accessing that information later.

The concept of Hanlon's Razor tells us that we should not attribute to malice in another person what can be explained by ignorance, i.e. if someone does something wrong or inappropriate, it is unproductive and misplaced to assume they meant to hurt anyone. It is more likely they simply made a mistake. This becomes even more important in remote situations where context is missing, and misunderstandings are more likely.

Another method of compensating for a lack of context due to remote work is to be more forward, open, and assertive than one normally would. Without the ability to pick up on things like mood and social cues from others, it becomes increasingly difficult to read and respect coworkers' mental states. Finding ways to share and read an individual's context explicitly can cut down on this problem. Setting up guidelines ahead of time, such as rules of when employees are or are not open to interruptions, can avoid misunderstandings. Being open, upfront, and transparent about one's needs can be difficult for some but can greatly streamline and clarify interactions.

Overall, companies handle remote work in different ways, but it is up to each team member to find the way that works best for them. Organizations and individuals can experiment with what

works best. But sharing context with teammates is consistently an essential means of communicating needed information that allows individuals to work together effectively.⁶

Tips on Working from Home

Though the ability to work remotely offers flexibility and the option to work in multiple locations—and (for some) even clock in dressed in your pajamas—the transition can be challenging, and working from home potentially isolating, demotivating, and stressful. But certain strategies can ease the difficulty of making and maintaining this adjustment.

Overarching considerations include sustaining a work/life balance, staying motivated without seeing coworkers, and staying healthy. Individually, methods to these ends can include: separating work and living spaces; taking regular breaks; identifying ideal work times; stepping away from work to exercise regularly; and documenting processes via checklists. To create and stick to a schedule, “Try to get up at the same time, and do all the things you would typically do to get ready for work,” says William Castellano, professor at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations. “Make sure you’re thinking about how you’re going to structure your day similarly” to how you did before.⁷

Assuring productivity when working from home can mean setting boundaries, e.g. pick a spot for your office away from distraction, and limit access to you from other people in the household such as roommates, partners, or children. Having conversations with managers and coworkers about adjusting expectations may also be necessary to manage demands on your time, energy, and resources.

From a team standpoint, best practices can involve: voicing problems to keep coworkers updated and aware of any concerns; centralizing information to let everyone know what’s happening; talking in group channels to create a knowledge base; scheduling weekly calls to maintain communication and rapport; organizing and sharing schedules so everyone is kept

⁶ Cooper, B. (2019 April 1). *How to build strong relationships in a remote team*. <https://zapier.com/learn/remote-work/remote-team-communication/>

⁷ Isaac, M., Yaffe-Belany, D., and Wise, K. (2020 March 5). *Workplace vs. coronavirus: ‘No one has a playbook for this.’* New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/business/coronavirus-offices-covid-19.html>

informed and aware of each other's work; automating busy work to free up extra time; and having monthly review sessions to keep team members grounded and informed.⁸

For many people, preparing for the isolation of working from home can be essential. Addressing this can mean proactively staying in touch with coworkers rather than waiting for them to reach out, as well as emailing colleagues more often, having conference calls, and using chat tools or video conferencing. Lastly, when it's time to finish the work day, one should put their work away to make the transition to home life. Taking recovery time from work can be key when personal resources are under stress.

When Working from Home Doesn't Work

Approximately 42 million of the 144 million U.S. workers could do their jobs at home in 2018, or just 29% of the workforce, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). For the remaining majority of Americans, particularly low-paid hourly workers and people of color, there are few options and few benefits. A quarter of Americans have no recourse to paid leave, and the rate is much higher among industries without options for remote work. Almost half of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher said they were able to work remotely, compared with only roughly 3% of workers who didn't complete high school. Further BLS data found that only 20% of black employees and 16% of Latino employees have the option of working from home.⁹

Lawmakers have noted that the public health threat from the coronavirus will have underlying yet substantial costs for low-wage workers. In addition to many lacking adequate health insurance, those without sick leave have the most to lose by staying home. As yet, only 13 states have some form of paid leave requirements. And though some companies have come to understand that changes are necessary, for many workers remote work or taking time off without pay isn't financially feasible. The Walmart watchdog group United for Respect recently issued a statement that many employees are going to work sick because they can't afford to

⁸ Mulholland, B. (2018 June 15). *The 19 best tips from my 3 years working at home*. Process.st. <https://www.process.st/working-remotely/>

⁹ Green, J. (2020 March 4). *Just 29% of Americans can work remotely, leaving 100 million in virus limbo*. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-04/coronavirus-latest-what-if-i-can-t-work-from-home>

stay home. Many low-wage Americans have had a no-win choice thrust upon them: go to work sick and risk their health while potentially infecting the public or face financial collapse.

Author Information

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