



Practical Guidance for Effectively Managing Work Remotely During COVID-19

*“You are not working from home, you are at home, during a crisis, trying to work.”
– Unknown*

Managing work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic is not the same as managing work remotely during normal times. The abrupt shift to remote work that many organizations have experienced is further complicated by unreliable internet connections, makeshift workspaces, children home from school, and general anxiety. People have likely been less productive, or experienced greater stress as they adjust to the practical and psychological effects of distancing.

Despite these challenges, our clients have appreciated their staff’s adaptability, commitment and creativity in making the new situation work. Learning from early success, figuring out how to resolve problems, and determining a sustainable pace going forward are important next steps.

This article provides **practical guidance** for how to manage work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic—to affirm what you have already put into practice, or to share ideas on what you can improve going forward.

Start First with People Who Can’t Work Remotely

If you’re in an organization where some people are still providing essential services in person, they should be the starting point for thinking about remote work:

- What kind of communication do they want?
- What are the best ways to reach them?
- How do they hope to be involved in decision-making?

Depending on your industry and your organization, people may have different preferences. Some possibilities include:

- Brief regular meetings for leadership to coordinate and communicate between those working remotely and those working in person
- A senior leader or manager who works in person and becomes the primary communication liaison

- Providing appropriate technology and training for those working in-person to participate meaningfully in remote meetings, especially those who do not regularly work in front of a computer
- Scheduling remote meetings at times to make it easier for those working in-person to attend and participate

Asking people working in person for their input, and considering their ideas expresses appreciation for those doing essential work for your organization and taking the most risk during this time. Even if your own team is fully remote, you can still prioritize the needs of those working in person, to make sure they can participate and be informed.

Make Sure Basic Technology is Available and Enhance Remote Security Measures

Not everyone has the technology in place to work from home successfully and your organization may not be set up for primarily working in person. Make sure that employees working remotely have access to technology and that security is a top priority.

Consult with your IT department or consultant about additional security measures or methods to enhance employees' ability to work remotely. Be prepared for additional hardware and software requests to meet those needs, including figuring out accommodations for employees who may not have reliable internet access at home, or may not have a laptop or computer (i.e., many families have one computer shared among multiple people).

Set Working Hours Expectations and Encourage Rest

Staff may find it harder to manage the boundary between work and personal life. It may be easy to stay connected to email into the evening, while at the same time, finding it difficult to focus during the day, while taking care of children or others at home. Your organization or your team can set expectations for working hours that balance flexibility for people's personal situations, productivity, and the need for people to have time to disconnect from work.

Working hours expectations may include:

- Number of hours people are expected to work during the week
- Working hours availability for pre-scheduled meetings (e.g., 9am - 4pm); being mindful of needs of people who may be working in person
- General responsiveness expectations for working hours, that allows people to take care of other needs (e.g., available for urgent phone calls, able to respond to urgent emails within two hours)

- Flexibility to work alternative hours
- Expectations for keeping calendars up-to-date
- Encouragement for people to take time to disconnect and recharge (e.g., including use of delay send on email, encouraging people to not schedule meetings in the evening, give somebody an extra day off)
- Availability if people working in person need to contact people

Each team can also develop more detail if appropriate for their teams.

Establish Communication Agreements

Communication tends to increase with the shift to remote work. What once were casual conversations and idea-sharing, or quick brainstorming conversations at somebody’s desk, suddenly end up as inbox emails and multiple conference calls.

Organizations and/or teams can set up agreements for how they want to communicate, and check in every few weeks to see how they are working. Finding the right balance between email, other communication tools and conference calls/videos can be tricky. Here are a few practical suggestions:

- If your organization is new to remote technology tools, take your time to get people eased in. Try not to introduce too many tools at once.
- Avoid using email for everything. Figure out if there are other ways to keep people updated, such as project management software, shared documents, phone calls, chat, and collaboration software
- Team phone calls/video conferences should generally be focused on connecting relationally, making decisions, and robust discussions, rather than basic updates on work progress
- That being said, brief daily or semi-weekly standing meetings for coordination and updates, in situations where things are happening fast, can be valuable
- Encourage people to make short calls or use online chat whenever possible to ask quick questions, or resolve smaller issues

Organizations can create a communications norms document to make these expectations explicit. Here is a basic sample that you can adapt:

Methods	When to Use
Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For general updates

Chat (if available)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For quick questions
Other communication tools (e.g. Project Management Tools, Communication or Collaboration Software)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For longer discussions and coordination around bigger projects and initiatives (e.g. covid-19 response, new marketing campaign) • For updates on projects and individual/teamwork
Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working hours only. • For urgent questions and for coordinating challenges with technology (e.g. Can't log in)
Phone call/Video (Spontaneous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For quick questions that are better addressed through conversation • For decision-making that requires more in-depth discussion
Phone call/Video (Scheduled)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For coordinating work ("huddle"), connecting relationally, weekly accountability conversations, for giving/receiving feedback • For serious decision-making, discussion and planning

The document can also contain shared norms around digital shorthand, such as:

- 4HR – Response required in 4 hours
- NNTR – No need to respond
- FYI – For Your Information

Assume Positive Intent

Communication is easily misunderstood in the remote context. When an email chain or strange conference call interaction creates negative emotions or judgments about another person, it helps to remember to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. If important enough, it can be easy to follow up with curiosity and hear the other person's perspective by phone or video: *"I had a strong reaction to your email. I'm not sure that's what you intended. Could you explain what you were you trying to communicate?"*

Communications norms can contain principles that address this:

- Assume positive intent

- Pick up the phone or schedule a quick meeting if the email chain is longer than four emails
- Seek to resolve small disagreements and misunderstandings

As an added reminder, given that this is a time of anxiety and uncertainty, people may have moments where they are not managing their emotions well. Extending kindness and being empathetic in those situations, while encouraging people to express their emotions in a healthy manner, supports a positive work environment.

Managing Work and Accountability

The principles of effectively managing working remotely are not substantively different from managing in person. People feel most accountable when they:

- Are working towards clear goals, especially if they have a role in influencing what those goals are
- Understand the purpose and impact of their work
- Can determine the best way to complete the work
- Can determine the timing in the context of organizational needs
- Have access to support and resources needed to complete the work
- Feel excited or interested in the work itself

When delegating work to others, it is important to:

- Help the person understand the broader purpose and goals of the work
- Invite the person to figure out how best to fulfill those goals
- Give the person as much freedom as possible in how they accomplish the work
- Discuss the right timing for the work, which may be a negotiation, depending on competing priorities
- Provide support as needed especially if the assignment is a stretch for the person's goals
- Establish expectations for when you might check in and review work

All this remains true in the remote working world. The tricky part is that our natural signs of whether people are working are no longer available (i.e., we can't see somebody in their office). The truth is, we should not rely on that as an indicator of whether somebody is doing work in the first place. This is an

opportunity to remember to hold people accountable to goals, rather than specific tasks or simply being in the office.

In practice, this means establishing clear goals up front with people about what they will accomplish in a set time period and figuring out how to follow up. In practice, this could mean:

- 1-on-1 meetings to check in, hear progress, address concerns and revise timelines and responsibilities as needed
- Weekly team email or email to manager outlining priorities from each team member
- A simple online team board of projects to share what they are working on, either on a shared file or through project management software.
- Regular team meetings for coordination, discussion, decision-making and learning.

Apart from regularly established check-ins, resist the urge to constantly ask people about their work progress—that can lead to people feeling micromanaged. If somebody does miss a deadline or does not perform work as expected, then that is the appropriate time to give feedback, explore why, and develop an agreement about how to monitor work going forward.

Stay Connected

Building good relationships is essential for effective work. Working in person can make that easier: having an impromptu lunch or chatting casually with a colleague after a meeting. When working remotely, we need to structure these interactions, rather than relying on them to happen naturally.

We've heard many simple ideas for how to do this:

- Taking a few minutes at the beginning of regular phone calls/video calls to connect personally with the other person
- Using check-in questions at the beginning of each meeting
- Sharing photos and stories of home office companions (human, animal or inanimate)
- “Coffee Chats” – short video calls where the purpose is for people to chat and keep each other updated
- Using a non-work chat channel

- Developing a buddy system where people are staying in touch with another peer for support and connection
- Sending a daily or weekly email with encouragement, suggestions for mindfulness, and a humorous cartoon
- Sending small messages of appreciation and encouragement

Some of these ideas, such as a buddy system and check-in questions, can also help people working remotely stay connected to those working in person.

Embrace Learning

We are living through an unprecedented worldwide shift to remote work. We cannot expect everything to go perfectly, but we can set the expectation in our organizations that we will stay engaged, keep learning and continue to improve.

Regularly giving and receiving feedback, conducting after actions reviews, testing new approaches, and checking in on how agreements are going, can establish a learning mindset. Mistakes and misunderstandings are opportunities to figure out how to do things better going forward. Learning together strengthens relationships, generates solutions, and supports creativity, as we all figure out how to make the best of our new working situations.

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