

BEING HUMAN AND DOING OUR BEST WORK VIRTUALLY

Working from home is not a new concept, in fact, it's something that many workplaces have encouraged so that employees can have more flexibility to manage both their work and home lives. The coronavirus crisis is pushing virtual working to another level, by reducing our ability and willingness to travel, cancelling conferences, and moving teams offsite.

Changing ideas about productivity and what it means to 'work from home' also means that nowadays, working virtually doesn't mean taking a few calls and extra time thinking about preparing that document because you were getting distracted in the office. Expectations are much higher and team, company conferences, meetings and client events are all moving toward virtual communication, away from face to face. This presents leaders and employees with new challenges.

As leaders throughout the country and around the world are tasked with creating business continuity plans to meet the challenge of coronavirus, some of the questions they may be asking are: How do they continue their humanness with their work colleagues whilst they work virtually? How can you build and challenge colleagues' ideas virtually? How do you know if your team member is struggling or needs some support if you don't see them? What about new team members who have recently joined the company? How can you do that impromptu sharing of information/ideas as you pass someone's desk and see they are free to chat? How do you maintain that team community, without sharing your weekend experiences, running a marathon as a team or doing a team a community event? Where do you get different ideas and perspectives on an issue? How do you 'read' a room when all you can only see one person at a time or only hear participants on a call?

All of these things are possible and ultimately it's about trial and error. Doing things differently and adapting, is something we do constantly. The difference is that this change is happening quickly rather than over a longer period. But if we look at it as an opportunity to learn, we may end up finding value in this unexpected challenge.

So what can we do, during this time of change to keep morale up and ensure that we're still being human at work?

Make time to be personal: Introduce time to your team meetings for people to talk about what's on their mind rather than going straight to the agenda. Some leaders arrange a call with their remote-working colleagues to check in on how people's weekends were - a 'coffee break' call with no work agenda, the priority is to keep connected.

Learn your tech and use it well: We all have high expectations of what we expect from technology and when it doesn't work, it's the first thing we blame. Keep in mind there is so much more available than a year ago. Don't just use the video facility (make this mandatory, instead of just audio as people will make

more effort) use the site board, sharing screens and resources that allow you to co-create documents together to feel connected. The better you know your tech, the better and harder it will work for you.

Mean business: As the chair, you set the tone for the meeting. Be clear early how you are going to run the meeting. Set ground rules early on. Simple things like don't talk over each other, signal to the chair (via chat, is a good option) if you have a comment. Add in pauses to calls to ensure everyone is able to contribute. Allow times to take into account coming on and off mute. If possible, agree for people not to go on mute. We don't have that facility in the office do we?

Reduce screen time: virtual working can mean you can fit more meetings in, as you don't need to factor travel, and that includes walking to the meeting room. But more isn't always better. Ensure your teams build in time to exercise, have screen breaks, and take their lunch hours. Calls are intense, don't schedule a full day meeting, split up the subjects into bite sized sessions. Encourage your teams to find a spot where they will be comfortable and productive.

Learn: Finally use this as a learning opportunity for future remote working practices. What worked and what didn't? Ask for feedback.

The reality is we are all going to be working virtually at some point, to access skills and talent around the world. Let's get it right now! Partnering with our technology providers to get through this period, and then being able to tell them what we have learned from this experience, will mean we'll all be able to continue improving how we can do our best work.

They say necessity is the mother of invention. World War I, whilst horrific, brought society a number of innovations that are still in use today, including zippers and tea bags. COVID is not a welcome event, but we can use it to get us future 'fit' for a new way of working. Soon, the traditional 9 to 5, five days a week won't exist. Let's take this opportunity to find what suits us best as human beings to develop our best ideas and do our best work and banish those Sunday night blues!