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WHITE PAPER

Making Remote Work, Work

On the back of the pandemic-induced lockdown measures, widespread remote work advanced beyond its infancy stage. But how ready are we to optimise the best related working-from-anywhere practices?

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Keywords

Abstract

The world of work has shifted dramatically on the back of rapid digitalisation, which continues at breakneck speed. Digital transformation creates significant opportunities for remote working. The purpose of this paper is to explore this 'work-from-anywhere' approach that will require a virtual leadership culture, the need for self-discipline, and greater individual autonomy, cloud-based operations, technological parity, and clear protocols and systems. This paper explores key remote work terms as well as the driving forces, advantages, and disadvantages of remote work from the perspective of workers and employers. Reference is made to designing for remote work, with the hybrid remote option being explored in particular. Moreover, practical steps to improve remote working productivity – specifically culture, communication, meetings, and collaboration tools – are investigated.

**REMOTE
WORK**

**VIRTUAL
LEADERSHIP**

**VIRTUAL
TEAMS**

**HYBRID
REMOTE**

COLLABORATION

Contemplating the idea of remote work

Douglas Adams, author of comic novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, wrote, 'We're stuck with technology, when what we really want, is just stuff that works' (Adams, 2005: 117). Undoubtedly, in today's work environment, we are more connected than ever, more online than ever, and the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed and scaled how we communicate and collaborate from a distance. An 'office in the cloud' is now the norm; work is no longer a place we go to, and many of us have entered a work from anywhere (WFA) age. However, the question is whether this 'remote way' that so heavily relies on technology really represents 'stuff that works'?

An Enterprise Technology Research survey found that the number of people who will permanently work from home will probably double in 2021 (Chavez-Dreyfuss, 2021). While remote working provides huge advantages, it is not without its challenges and will require careful organisational design, improved connectivity, and a new generation of leaders. Despite these challenges, it seems flexible working is here to stay. Remote work is now characterised more as an issue of autonomy, rather than a matter of location (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). To work effectively, remote work needs a combination of technology enablers and individuals who

understand self-efficacy (the belief that they can actually execute on the tasks required in a remote environment) (Parker et al., 2020). These elements need to be combined with a willingness on the part of the remote teams to strive for collaboration, and team leaders who are astute at leading from a distance.

This so-called 'Results-Only Work Environment' (ROWE) means that leaders need to simultaneously be much clearer about expected outcomes and deliverables and more flexible about how team members go about project execution. Before examining the topic of remote work, some key terms and definitions are presented.



Remote Work: Key terms

Remote working has made us all aware of new terminology that captures how organisations now operate:

All Remote

All-remote refers to the situation where 'each individual in an organization is empowered to work and live where they are most fulfilled' (GitLab, 2021a: 10).

Remote First

Remote first is adopted by companies that optimise remote working and consider existing physical offices as anchor venues to work from remotely (GitLab, 2021a: 14).

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy refers to an individual's capacity to source, assess, and communicate information across a wide range of digital platforms. The level of digital literacy is indicated by an ability to produce text, images, audio, and designs using technology (Osterman, 2012).

The Co-located Team

The co-located team refers to a functional team working on a project sharing the same workspace (Schaubroeck and Yu, 2017).

Digital Fluency

Digital fluency is the ability to both 'select and use the appropriate digital tools and technologies to achieve a particular outcome' (Demir and Odabasi, 2021: 163). This requires an integrated approach and is a combination of technological parity, digital operations, collaborative leadership behaviours, and a commitment to developing the attitude and skills and seeing the value of 'going digital' (Accenture, 2020: 17).

Digital Dexterity

Digital dexterity is the ability to adapt and adopt existing and emerging technologies in a particular field to produce better results for the organisation (Rolf, 2020).

Distributed Team

Distributed team implies that a team of employees is working in various different locations (Berntzen and Wong, 2021).

Hybrid Team

A hybrid team refers to working teams that operate between multiple locations. This often presents a combination of time working at a co-located office space and time working from other locations, such as at home (GitLab, 2021a).

Hybrid-Remote

Hybrid-remote provides employees a 'menu' with several options to choose from, which may include an in-office option, a flexible work option whereby employees work in office for a number of days per week, and a remote option (GitLab, 2021a).

Technological Parity

Technological parity is meant to empower employees with all the tools and the systems they need to perform their duties from any device they may have and from any location (Kurtzman, 2020).

Acknowledging the top drivers of remote work

Remote work is not new

Remote work is not new. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, several companies had been working remotely successfully for decades. However, the pandemic has played a significant part in the unprecedented revolution towards location-independent jobs. A valid question, though, is what else may be driving this massive move towards remote work? Most likely, businesses are increasingly acknowledging the economic benefits of managing critical business interdependencies from a distance. Besides ensuring business continuity, and the cost and flexibility benefits offered by remote work, three top forces are distinguished that drive remote work: technological advancements, improved collaboration, and organisational and individual strategic thought (Ferreira et al., 2021).

Technological advancements

The increased availability of cloud-based technologies is key in facilitating remote collaboration. The separation of hardware from software, enabling the 'virtualising' of hardware and 'Bring Your Own Device', fundamentally changes how remote workers interact with employers and colleagues. This surge in cloud-based operations means that a software platform or service can be accessed remotely from anywhere in the world. As a result, companies like Microsoft saw the equivalent of digital transformation that would typically occur in two years taking place in just two months from January to March 2020 (Microsoft, 2021). The combination of a physical gateway attached to remote equipment, the central server that collects and stores data, and the opportunity for secure remote access through a web interface has dramatically shifted the need for many in-person interactions to cloud-based alternatives. These technological advancements underpin the growing need for a more flexible, collaborative workforce.

Strategic thought

Organisational and individual strategic thought play a critical role in driving remote work. The opportunity to be geographically free and to align places, people, and technology in a way that makes organisations more agile is key.

At an organisational level, a drive towards more service-sector-type jobs can enhance the move to operate remotely. A study by McKinsey in November 2020 analysing 800 jobs across nine countries concluded that the potential for remote work is 'highly concentrated among highly skilled, highly educated workers in a handful of industries, occupations, and geographies' and that, 'the potential for remote work is determined by tasks and activities, not occupations' (Lund et al., 2020: 3).

Tasks that involve updating knowledge and interacting with computers showed the most potential for remote work without losing effectiveness. Consequently, professions in financial management, management services, and information technology show the highest potential for remote work and, as such, are linked to activities more prevalent in more advanced economies.

At an individual level, now that employees have experienced remote working options first-hand, more than 97% prefer to work remotely – even if only for part of the working week – and would recommend this way of working to others (Buffer, 2021).

Improved collaboration

The need to support massive virtual collaboration is another driving force for remote work. Lean, transactional activities linked to information transfer, approvals, coordination, and decision-making are equally, and even more, effective when performed virtually (Cross and Gray, 2021). The ability to bring the best minds in the business together from any part of the globe is a key enabler and opportunities for collaboration seem almost endless when a balance is struck between the expectations of the company and individual autonomy.

What can we expect of the **future world of work?**

Increasingly, in the third decade of the 21st century, the Fifth Industrial Revolution (IR5.0) is a popular topic of conversation, advancing from Fourth Industrial Revolution discussions about robotics, artificial intelligence, and blockchain. Questions now more strongly revolve around innovation, purpose, and inclusivity, raising consciousness about how people and machines will perform work in a more complementary way (Joseph, 2020). Combining the very distinct, cognitive abilities of workers and the precise, highly specialised skills of robots will introduce a very new and advanced culture into the workforce (George and George, 2020). One of the many implications of IR5.0 is that professional work will be much more location-independent. The 'detachment of work from a place is an undeniably important aspect of the changing nature of work in the twenty-first century' (Ferreira et al., 2021: 3).

At the same time, the relationship between trust and technology remains tenuous, if not paradoxical. Cyber security requires a 'zero-trust' approach to networks, data, resources, workloads, and devices. With people working remotely, securing networks, controlling access and usage of resources, and knowing who is risk-prone is paramount. A zero-trust approach to remote work proposes a 'never trust, always verify' approach, moving from implicit trust to explicit permission for network access. Conversely, once access is granted, virtual collaboration between people working remotely requires the assumption of positive intent and 'swift trust'. This social contract would need to specify how teams collaborate reciprocally, exchange information, and develop shared values and expectations based on mutual trust and fairness (Riordan and O'Brien, 2012).

Focused thought would also be required around issues relating to the business case for remote work (e.g., reduced operating costs, improved employee value proposition, and broader access to a larger talent pool), employees' experience (e.g., employee engagement, and improved well-being), and overall organisational enablement (e.g., facilities, technology, and workflow) (Gartner, 2021). Clarity concerning who does the work and how work gets done in a remote context would be critical. The future of remote work also entails potential disparities between what employers want (e.g., increased productivity, adaptability, and cost reduction) and what employees want (e.g., connecting with family and community, flexibility, and lack of commute) (Mallet et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is to be expected that there will be a significant rise in the number of 'digital nomads' – employees who embrace a location-independent, technology-enabled lifestyle and who combine remote work and travel if they can connect to the Internet (MBO Partners, 2020).





Stages of remote work

Remote work is associated with several distinct stages of evolution, which are either developed intentionally or based on the changing dynamics of the organisation or the working environment. GitLab (2021b) described these as progressing from:

No Remote

No remote – everyone is co-located in the same physical location.

Remote Allowed

Remote allowed – some workers are allowed to work away from the central office for all or part of the workweek.

Hybrid-Remote

Hybrid-remote – a scenario where part of the company commutes to one or more offices daily to work face-to-face in the same space, paired with another section of the organisation that is not co-located.

Remote-Based

Remote-based to one time zone – work is conducted largely asynchronously in a single time zone, with no headquarters, and each team member is free to live and work wherever they choose, within that time zone.

All-remote, asynchronous across time zones – there are no headquarters, and each team member is free to live and work any time and in any place they choose. Greenberg (2020: 3) notes that “ a remote team is a business that operates entirely from home offices. There is no centralized headquarters, just a registration address for business purposes.”

Advantages of remote work

Studies show that remote work yields numerous benefits, specifically higher levels of productivity and employee engagement (Choudury, 2020). However, the associated advantages need to be considered from an organisational and an individual employee perspective.

Organisational Advantages

The advantages of remote work at an organisational level include the fact that employers have access to a global pool of remote expertise. This means that companies can remain highly competitive in a very unpredictable market (Ferreira et al., 2021). More specifically, it is proposed that 'The main advantages of remote work are.... reducing the costs of maintaining the office [and] wider geography for finding candidates' (Blumberga and Pylinska, 2019: 281). Remote working specialists argue that 'talent flows where flexibility reigns' (GitLab, 2021b: 4).

Other noteworthy organisational advantages include increased team performance and the ability to leverage from a much wider talent pool, achieving significantly higher retention levels amongst remote teams (Trueman and Rozwell, 2019). From a productivity perspective, remote work, particularly when conducted across multiple time zones, makes it possible for teams to hand off work to each other over 24 hours, leveraging a broader range of input and improving turnaround times and efficiencies (Beño, 2021).

Employee Advantages

For individual employees, important advantages of remote work include:

Obtaining the desired balance between work and personal life, reducing time and material costs for the road, reducing emotional stress, the appearance of additional free time, the ability to consider work in another region without having to move (Blumberga and Pylinska, 2019: 281).

Equally appreciated employee advantages of remote work include increased productivity and morale, improved work-life balance, increased job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and enhanced worker autonomy (Ferreira et al., 2021). The burnout question is an interesting one and more research is required. There is evidence to show that increased burnout, amongst other factors, can also be a disadvantage of remote work.

Disadvantages of remote work

Remote work is certainly not without its disadvantages. The loss of context as a result of a lack of proximity presents itself in various guises at organisational and individual employee levels.

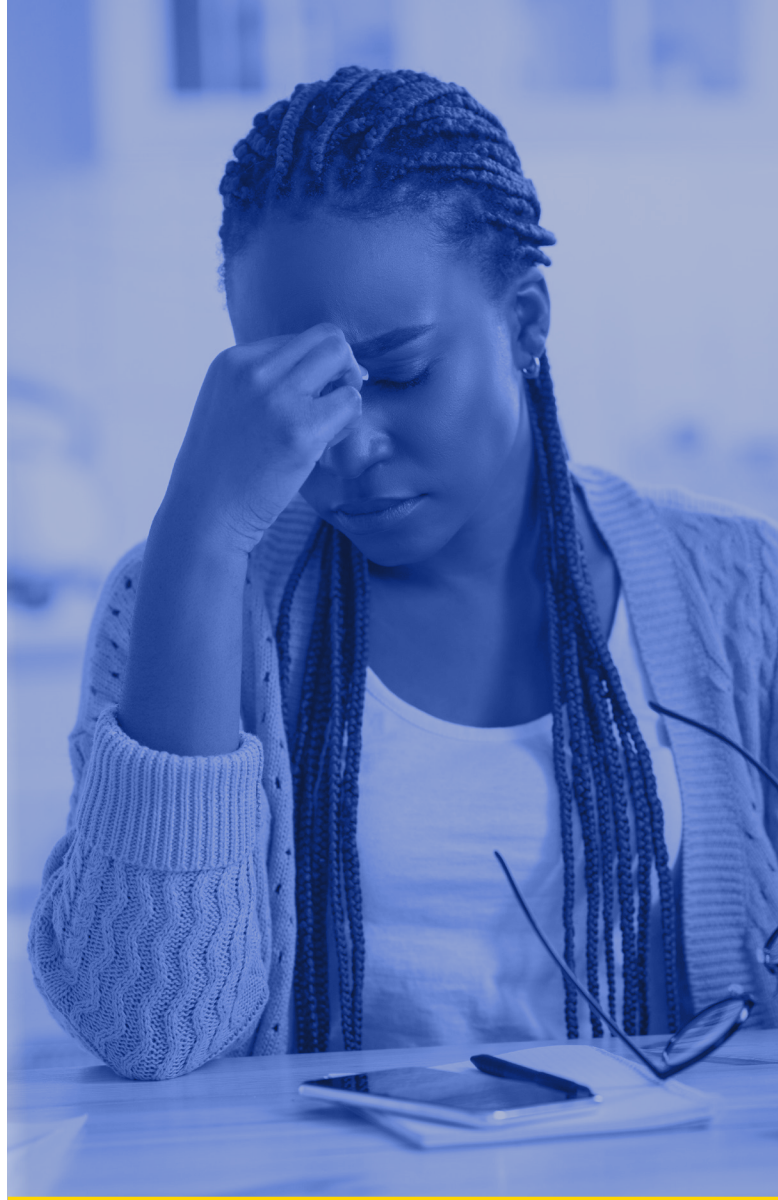
Organisational Disadvantages

When the majority or all the employees work remotely, several issues may come afloat related to security, communication, socialisation, knowledge sharing, and performance evaluation (Choudury, 2020). Microsoft (2021) identified the top three challenges of remote working as a lack of cohesion, missing company culture, and increased silos. GitLab (2021a) confirmed that a lack of visibility between team members across the organisation as well as differences in processes and ways of working from one team to another significantly contributed to the development of organisational silos. Rich qualitative exchanges involving energising interactions that provide a sense of purpose, job feedback, and problem-solving are best done in a face-to-face context (Ferreira et al., 2021).

Employee Disadvantages

Greenberg (2020) noted that not everyone can make it as a remote worker. From individual employees' perspectives, very specific disadvantages are associated with remote work. Some of these disadvantages include: increased isolation and stress (Toscano and Zappalà, 2020); digital overload and burnout due to long working hours (Alexander, De Smet, Langstaff and Ravid, 2021), an inability to switch off (Microsoft, 2021); ineffective communication, interference in work-home life, stalling, and solitude (Wang et al., 2021); blurred lines between work and home (Galanti, Guidetti, Mazzei, Zappalà, and Toscano, 2021), often with a home situation that is not prepared for the 'collision of two worlds' (Zykova and Maussymbek, 2021); concern about a lack of clarity and job certainty, and remote-relevant issues; and fragmentation of work, confusion about what is required, and even lack of work-life balance (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021).

Team members often feel separated and disconnected from others. According to an IT colleague, 'as humans we are wired to connect in analogue, but virtual requires a digital connection, which is never as rich as those continuous values provided in face-to-face communication' (Lew Thorne, personal communication).



Designing for remote work

To optimise the opportunities it could offer, remote work needs to be designed in terms of various collaboration layers (Kurtzman, 2020).

- Collaborative remote work starts with a security/governance/compliance layer that assumes 'zero trust' and where data protection, security, and integrity are paramount. This first compliance layer is designed on the assumption that 'organizations should not automatically trust anything inside or outside its perimeters and instead must verify anything and everything trying to connect to its systems before granting access' (Pratt, 2018).
- The following communications layer involves protocols on messaging, conferencing, team collaboration applications, and agreement on communication that specifies synchronous/asynchronous protocols.
- A content layer incorporates protocols on office suites and file sharing so that information repositories can be created and stored.
- A productivity layer includes work management integration, systems of record integration, communities and social media, machine learning, and even artificial intelligence to provide 'a single pane of glass for workers to do whatever they have to, wherever they have to' (Kurtzman, 2020).
- A trust and openness layer is important to ensure that people feel safe enough to share their best ideas.
- A mentor and model layer accentuates the relevance of peer mentors at every level of the organisation.
- A cross-silo membership layer will facilitate boundary spanning.

Implications of a **hybrid-remote** model

For many companies, adopting a hybrid-remote model seems to be one of the most attractive options in a post-pandemic work environment. In the 2021 Work Trend Survey, 66% of companies surveyed indicated that they are redesigning for hybrid work (Microsoft, 2021). A hybrid-remote workplace provides a range of options. The first option is that some employees will work in the office, while others will work remotely. The second option is that all the employees will spend some part of their working week in the office and part of the week remotely. The third option is a combination of the two previous options. In most cases, hybrid-remote is regarded a 'two-tier working environment'. The challenge with managing this two-tier system is getting the individuals who are co-located to keep the remote team members in the loop.

According to Fayard et al. (2021: 5), the office of the future will need to be designed to 'foster human connection with the help of technology'. As much as company managers are calling for employees to come back to the office, even on a part-time or hybrid basis, it is said that remote employees are threatened with a return to the office as a way of managing underperformance. Conversely, there may be perceptions that those working effectively but who are not co-located, are 'out of sight, out of mind'. The unintended consequence may be that remote workers are less likely to be promoted, despite their increased productivity (Bloom et al., 2015; Kessler, 2021).



Improving remote work productivity

Whatever the design of future workplaces, they will need to be geared to optimise remote work productivity and towards developing 'virtual proximity'. To create that sense of proximity, a collaborative remote work culture and an understanding of how to leverage the remote talent pool are vital. Once remote teams are configured, protocols on remote communication, meetings and collaborative tools, and software need to be prioritised. Remote work productivity starts with understanding how remote talent is identified and onboarded.

The war for remote talent

Because remote work means that individuals can WFA, employers have wider access to the pool of talent and can hire from anywhere. Once hired, remote talent onboarding requires a clear working process that establishes the relationship between the various steps in the workflow. In the remote work context, self-discipline is a critical enabler. Many remote workers struggle because remote work relies on self-motivation, persistence, and individual goal setting. Consequently, individuals who do well in a co-located context may not necessarily perform equally well in the remote context.

Companies entering into the remote working talent pool will also need to decide if they are happy to recruit digital nomads (Everson et al., 2021). An even greater opportunity is how remote hiring can be used strategically to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion priorities.

Developing a collaborative remote work culture

The first step in developing a collaborative work culture is creating virtual trust – the level of trust that can be developed in the virtual world. Swift trust assumes positive intent from the beginning and lays the foundation for interpersonal trust that is built on predictability, consistency, and the sharing and rotating of power (Ferrazi, 2015). Swift trust was first defined as 'A unique form of collective perception and relating that is capable of managing issues of vulnerability, uncertainty, risks, and expectations', where 'familiarity, shared experience, reciprocal disclosure, threats and deterrence, fulfilled

promises, and demonstrations of non-exploitation of vulnerability' are not typically available (Meyerson et al., 1996: 167).

As a unique form of trust when working in the remote environment, swift trust gives remote team members the benefit of the doubt from the beginning of the relationship and builds relationships with a mindset that says 'give me reason not to trust you', rather than a default position that is often the inverse of that approach (Crisp and Jarvenpaa, 2013).

Another important element of a remote work culture is the need to prioritise digital literacy. Remote workers need to become adept at extracting explicit and implicit ideas (comprehension), meaningfully connecting relevant digital media (interdependence), sharing timely and relevant data with relevant networks (social factors), and storing and organising data in accessible ways (curation) (Heick, 2013).

Digital literacy creates the foundation for digital fluency, which is the ability to create and reformulate information as well as use digital technologies properly (Wang et al., 2013). Remote workers who demonstrate digital fluency can communicate in a remote language that generates understanding, certainty, and clarity.

Remote work culture is committed to supporting remote workers in the automation of repetitive tasks. This might involve compartmentalising email inboxes or using tracking dashboards in the collection and presentation of data and information (Jeffery, 2019).

Johnson and Suskewicz (2020:3) propose that remote work requires consideration around the technologies to make the system workable, the resources (policies, practices and processes) the system needs to function, as well as the rules, norms and metrics required to support a remote work culture.

One option for leadership in remote teams is to aim towards a ROWE. This is probably the biggest shift required in a remote working context and is often the real reason why leaders push for hybrid-remote rather than all-remote work. An all-remote ROWE context is where the focus is on outputs, rather than the number of hours worked. Even if the remote environment is not a total ROWE, leaders need to communicate clear expectations and deadlines, and then trust contributors to do what they do best. This will often mean resisting the temptation to micromanage every step of the project plan, reverting to virtual trust. Even within a ROWE culture, there needs to be clarity about expected remote worker availability.

Two of the key principles that leaders of remote teams need to guard against are overcommunication and radical transparency. In return, remote workers should focus on delivering results, as long as they have the relevant resources to do their jobs (Hakes, 2020).



Remote communication

One of the biggest challenges that most remote teams experience is a 'duplication of ideas'. While team communication remains a challenge, it is particularly true in a remote context. Often, remote workers experience communication from a distance as inefficient, time-consuming, and challenging, even for something as apparently innocuous as a request for visibility on a project or a status update.

The notion of 'bandwidth' in remote communication and collaboration is important. As a metaphor, bandwidth refers to how much attention is required at that moment in time. High-bandwidth engagements require more planning and, therefore, more bandwidth. Low-bandwidth engagements are more straightforward and not as context-rich (Brough, 2020).

Remote work communication needs to be considered in terms of real time (synchronous), as well as for asynchronous options. Real-time communication is typically synchronous and is most effective for one-on-one and remote coffee chats when both parties occupy the same virtual space, engaging with each other at that moment. Many companies are mandating that calls are now video- and voice-enabled to ensure that non-verbal communication supports the collaboration process. Asynchronous communication means that neither sender nor receiver need to be present or to respond immediately, in which case there is a record of what was discussed, allowing one to go back and check an instant message or the recording of a meeting that could not be

attended. In a remote work context, this type of communication is useful for the generation of ideas and to conduct day-to-day work, most decisions, and conversations. When the issue at hand is straightforward, it is not necessary to get everyone on the same call at the same time.

Remote meetings

One immediately obvious and dramatic shift during the pandemic was the increase in the number of remote meetings. As a rule, effective remote work requires very clear meeting guidelines, including meeting attendance, meeting pre-planning, participation, and accountability in terms of decisions and action items. The time taken to plan, schedule, and conduct remote meetings needs to be optimised. According to DeBara (2021), questions that could serve as useful guidelines are:

- 'Is the meeting even necessary?' Leaders need to clarify whether a meeting is primarily task-related or if a need or opportunity exists for social cohesion. The 'virtual water cooler' – a communal online platform that supports informal interaction – can often help to reinforce the social cohesion outside of formal meetings.
- 'Is everything on this agenda necessary?' Remote meetings need to be more concise. The idea of 'virtual stand-ups' or 'virtual speed meetings' are growing in popularity.
- 'Does everyone need to attend?' In a ROWE, it is very important to optimise time.
- 'Are those who need to attend the remote meeting, expected to attend all, or part of the meeting?'
- 'What meeting platform will be used?' The tools best suited for a one-on-one meeting are not necessarily equally effective for meetings with multiple attendees across multiple time zones.

A revolutionary approach adopted by GitLab is that meeting attendance is optional, enabling asynchronous contributions. The thinking is that if the collaborative tools and software are in place, then compulsory meeting attendance becomes unnecessary. All meetings are recorded and stored in the cloud. Meeting agendas are sent out well in advance and meeting minutes are created collaboratively using an online word processor. As one member of GitLab explained:

Agendas must be sent out beforehand. If there's no agenda, there's no meeting. Meetings must start and end on time. We also make sure that every meeting has a Google Doc where we all take notes at the same time. Team members collaborate on note-taking, while other team members speak. This allows multitasking and

collaborating on almost everything. That written copy, the transcript of the notes, is really important for team members who are not available to be on the call, as they might be in a time zone where they are sleeping and then they can review what was said (Jean du Plessis, personal communication).

Meetings need to shift from leader monologue to team dialogue. This means that teams leaders should not be afraid to democratise presenter rights and give team members mouse, keyboard, and video camera rights. Principles of “anyone remote-all remote”, accurate chat status (so colleagues know whether you are available), quick chat protocols (to enable rapid fire questions), being comfortable to, “idle in a video conference room” while working silently together, and even creating specific, video-based social events, are all practical changes that support remote working (Limoncelli, 2020).

Remote collaboration tools and software

Remote collaboration tools and software

A key element of remote work success is the remote playbook. This document sets out not just the mission, vision, and values of the remote team, but also the communication protocols, including user guidelines, frequency of use, and preferred media.

In a flexi-synchronous environment, meetings incorporate collaborative whiteboards and include asynchronous emails, wireframes (a schematic or blueprint), or mock-ups (models or prototypes) where different team members provide input. The adoption of collaborative tools has accelerated by five years and, consequently, 56% of collaborative tools started as ‘unauthorised’ (Kurtzman, 2020). Possible solutions that are worthwhile exploring include:

- MIRO: virtual whiteboard, interactive activities, gamification of goals, template library, brain writing.
- Atlassian: document collaboration, visual project collaboration/business team collaboration, Jira, Trello.
- Slack (leveraging open application programming interfaces and flexible technologies): maximising agility and minimising risk.

The most effective remote working collaborative tools are designed to measure and track outputs, rather than simply activity.



Conclusion

This paper examined the concept of remote work as well as its driving forces, advantages, and disadvantages from the point of view of employers and employees. Reference was made to designing the workplace and employment models with remote work in mind as the way for the future. In particular, the hybrid remote model was explored as one option for many. Practical steps to improve remote working productivity, specifically culture, communication, meetings, and collaboration tools, were discussed to indicate how good leadership could motivate workers to excel and feel worthy.

The challenge for remote work will be to see how the advances in connectivity allow for meaningful interpersonal connection. If that can be achieved and if remote work adopts a partnership approach, we will avoid reinforcing a situation in the remote work context where, 'he who is absent is wrong' (Cooke, 2021: 12). If we are to really make remote work, work, then intentional engagement, self-efficacy and autonomy are the order of the day (Manko and Rosinski, 2020).



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