

Is Remote The New Management Style? Discover how to navigate this journey



What is Remote Work?

The coronavirus pandemic is expected to change the way we work in future. As organisations suggest to those that display Covid-19 symptoms to “self-quarantine and everyone else to practice “social distancing”, remote work has become the new “management style”. So, what is remote work? “Remote work” is when individuals, teams, employees, or independent contractors, to accomplish a shared organisational purpose, work/operate from anywhere (e.g., at home, in a distant location) other than at their designated physical place of work or employment. This results in individuals or teams having to communicate largely over virtual platforms. The expectation is that modern technology will enable us to maintain connectivity and to conduct our business without sacrificing standards of performance and collaboration, even though we may be dispersed geographically. Some remote workers are full-time, others may have the flexibility to work remotely if and when they choose, and then there are those with no choice as is the case with the periods of enforced lockdown coupled with social distancing during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

Are we ready to work remotely? Are we ready to manage individuals or teams working remotely? We may be excited at either one of these prospects, but are we all familiar with the associated challenges? While there are a lot of similarities between managing remote staff and managing those on-site, it is however a mistake to assume that a remote employee is the same as the one in the office. Remote staff are faced with unique challenges and these have to be understood.

Challenges faced by remote staff include: ‘unplugging’ after work, lack of face-to-face supervision, lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues and clients, lack of reliable connectivity and access to information, loneliness, distractions at home, etc. The more we understand the needs and challenges of working remotely the more prepared we will be for what is increasingly becoming the norm.

Implementation

Where is remote work more suitable? Rather than economic sectors, it will be more useful to list job types or work performed. This will give a better idea of the environment where the strategy can best be adopted. Job types or work best suited include, *inter alia*,: design, development, online marketing, writing/editing, customer support, call centres, teaching, accounting, data entry, virtual assistants (e.g., secretarial), social media management, commodity trading, sales, etc.

How do we implement a remote style of work? Successful implementation, at a high level, include the following activities: Create multidisciplinary and multi-level steering committee; identify your need/s, objective/s and benefit/s as well as the degree of urgency; assess organisational/team/individual readiness; plan a pilot down to individual jobs if necessary; communicate about the project; encourage participation and value input; provide the technology that remote teams will require; train where necessary; draft/adjust policies and procedures to support the initiative; pilot the program and evaluate; fine tune; communicate the final project plan; implement the remote work project; evaluate the outcome after a period of time; communicate the results of the evaluation; prepare for whatever the next step will be.

What Are The Benefits and Challenges Of Working Remotely?

For the purpose of this discussion it is academic to distinguish between whether we are referring to individuals or teams working remotely. Both experience benefits and challenges which vary in applicability and complexity from situation to situation, and therefore will have to be assessed accordingly. Despite the increased prevalence of remote work over the years, many organisations are still not equipped to adopt or create an adequate “model” for working remotely, and may struggle to meet the operational requirements of those with a preference for working remotely. While many do have the communication tools and software to go that route, they have concerns and biases about giving “autonomy” to employees. On the other hand, when organisations with the appropriate mind-set based on trust implement the proper tools and software, and put the correct processes in place, remote work can be a game changer.

Benefits of Working Remotely

A sudden change to work-from-home or working remotely can often be a boon for many organisations, especially with employee feelings of accountability and appreciation that accompany such a step. Further, it gives organisations **opportunities to re-evaluate core culture, existing structures, and business processes** that may have been stunting performance and growth in the past. Because talent has no borders, from a workplace perspective, the impact of **remote work will also be felt in the quality and quantity of resources that become available** for recruitment from an expanded geographical area.

Providing autonomy, demonstrating trust and being transparent are best practices and a “must haves” in

remote work situations. They **promote employee engagement, retention, motivation, improved morale, and employees feeling valued.**

Diverse teams are able to relate to a wider range of customers and users than homogeneous teams. Remote work diversity can give organisations operating in differing markets a competitive edge. Similarly, while remote work is not ideal for every organisation, it does provide **an opportunity to rethink team composition for more creative problem-solving capacity.**

Challenges, and Solutions, Arising Out Of Working Remotely

Awareness of the conditions that can promote and reduce the success of remote teams help to improve the way we operate. Here are some of the challenges or “to dos” pertaining to remote work. These must be addressed, whether in an emergency scenario or not.

Employees Must Be Prepared: Most organisations have not been set up for this, neither psychologically nor with the infrastructure. People are wondering what is going on with the company, with their objectives, with their clients, and in their environment as a result of this shift to remote work. Solutions include: Interventions should address soft (psychological) and hard (technological) issues, i.e., willingness and confidence as well as ability to execute. Employees should be made aware of the need and reasons for the change to remote work; next at both the individual and group levels the wanting to, desire or motivation for change must be addressed through providing an understanding of “what is in it for them”; as the change to remote work moves into implementation, knowledge about the change needs to be developed and questions must be answered around what the change will “look, feel and sound like”; next the resources and capability to implement or execute must be provided and developed; and lastly, the change to remote work must be reinforced to prevent things going back to the old behaviours and ways of operating. Some “to dos” supporting the above are dealt with in more detail below.

Employee Stress Levels: It doesn’t matter how much you prepare the team; some members are going to find it more stressful than others when working remotely. Look for signs like disorientation, fewer emails, and also quietness during virtual meetings. Solutions include: Show empathy; increase frequency of contact and encourage team members to do the same; involve Human Resources/Employee Assistance to offer encouragement and support. It will be opportune for the Chief Executive to be more visible through video and voice recordings to calm people down and to reassure everyone that there is “light at the end of the tunnel”.

Organisational Values: Organisations have over the years spent much energy agreeing on organisational values, culture, and the supporting behaviours. These have included treating employees as stakeholders, treating them equally, promoting long term relationships, creating productive work experiences, development, etc. Introducing a new concept like remote work will mean there will be general uncertainty about these. Solutions include: Reinforce the culture, the values, model the supporting behaviours, and remind staff of the channels to deal with “non-compliance”; ensure your

policies are not contradictory and support working remotely.

Policies: Every organisation has expectations, whether work is remote or not, around “conditions of employment”. Clear and well communicated policies and procedures will facilitate in keeping everyone focussed. Solutions include: Clarify expectations around hours of work, availability (personal versus work life), recruitment and selection, promotion, training and development, remuneration, leave, performance management, etc.

Communication/Access to Information: The risk of misinformation is high. Probably the biggest challenge facing remote work is intermittent/limited communication or a complete lack thereof. Email is not enough. Without the right tools, personnel talk less to one another, have less “mutual knowledge”, feel isolated, and remote work suffers. Solutions include: Brush up on your on-line communication skills. Make it easy for everyone to ask questions. Promote regular two-way dialogue between managers, the team as well as colleagues. Use instant messaging channels, video conferencing, daily check-ins, and voice notes. Try to maintain at least the same levels of communication as previously. The efficiency of remote work improves when rules of engagement are clear, e.g., timing of calls, frequency of calls, etc.

Trust: Display trust in and support the team. The alternative will be a manager who is frustrated and over concerned at the loss of “sight” of the team which could lead to inappropriate micromanagement. Solutions include: Don’t become consumed with and look for performance problems; rather allow the performance management and goal/task setting and review systems to take care of these.

Clear Instructions and Transparency: When people understand why they are doing something they can see how what they are doing fits into the bigger picture. Consequently they can prioritise more effectively and are more likely to take ownership. Solutions include: Provide clear expectations and instructions with reasons; have shared communication channels.

Personal Connections: Building a connected team goes a long way towards building trust which makes managing conflict easier. A big challenge is creating closeness among team members who may never have met one another in person, or have had very limited face-to-face interaction. Solutions include: Create a sense of community and “mutual knowledge” by creating space to discuss personal well-being, or use video calls to create a more intimate atmosphere; arrange annual conferences for the team members to attend in person.

Collaboration: Many feel that effective collaboration is the key to success as it is necessary to maintain productivity levels and projects on track. Solutions include: Team messaging, video conferencing, file sharing to facilitate feedback, remote brainstorming as well as decision making. Including employees in goal setting conversations and providing regular positive and constructive feedback helps create a collective mind set towards achieving goals.

Role Definition and Measureable Outputs: Without clear expectations accompanying your instructions you will have difficulty measuring, tracking and providing feedback on outputs. Solutions

include: Project management tools; time management tools; focus on what should be accomplished; emphasise the importance of roles and outputs to team/organisational success; and, because of reduced visibility of staff, managers must improve relationship building and monitoring techniques.

Focus on Outputs and Not Processes: The work-from-home and other remote landscapes will mean we are juggling with work, personal and family commitments while attempting to do our jobs. This sets up opportunities for each of us to operate in situations that have interests that are often conflicting.

Solutions include: Managers must pay more attention to what actually gets done (outputs), and focus less on process; managers must emphasise to the team the importance of outputs.

Recognition: During times of disruption, uncertainty, change, or attempting something new, we all enjoy some kind of acknowledgement for our efforts at mastering the situation. The same holds true for entering a new remote work environment or learning to operate some new technology. Solutions include: Because of the reduced visibility of staff, managers must improve relationship building and monitoring techniques; managers must find out the barriers to performance that the team has overcome and where colleagues have been of assistance.

Innovation: With uncertainty we all become hesitant and risk-averse when attempting something new or complex in order to reduce the prospects of failure. It is during uncertain and desperate times that we often need greater innovation to extricate ourselves and come out stronger. Solutions include: Support innovation and provide safety nets for failure; share successes; support initiatives to find something new where the risks are worthwhile.

Virtual Meetings: Face-to-face meetings internally and with clients will no longer be the norm. They will be replaced by virtual meetings where best meeting practice will go beyond clarifying the purpose, circulating an agenda, generating a list of who should attend, not having distractions during the meeting, etc. Solutions include: Introduce video conferencing so attendees can see one another; create a safe environment as some may feel uncomfortable meeting in this way; manage time extra carefully as you won't have the opportunity to walk into/drive to someone's office thereafter to discuss things further.

Technology/Equipment: Virtual communication is different. It requires more equipment than a laptop and mobile phone, and it will not necessarily be perfect or completely effective. Working remotely requires everyone involved to have access to the necessary technology and collaborative tools. This is to ensure that organisations can execute faster through keeping work organised and prioritised while ensuring that everyone is always online and on track. Don't assume everyone knows how to operate within a virtual environment or is comfortable doing so. Solutions include: Appropriate work/office accommodation – whether at home or elsewhere to work remotely; direct, one-on-one and team messaging technology to provide secure real time access to people and information that email and social messaging apps cannot; video conferencing to communicate face-to-face from just about anywhere; file sharing; digital note taking; process automation to speed up routine tasks; upskilling to use the various

tools that include: Cloud Computing, Zoom, Skype, Slack, Microsoft Teams, TeamViewer, etc.

Way Forward

Business continuity and productivity do not need to suffer over the medium to long terms as a result of working remotely. While there might be delays initially, business continuity and productivity must at least be maintained and even enhanced. We can't observe everything our team members are doing under normal circumstances. Our mindsets must change; we must be willing to believe and to learn that our teams will perform while working remotely. We must give them the correct tools, review priorities, monitor performance (outcomes) in the same ways we have always done, and stop focusing on process. Remote work has been around for decades. The difference is that today we have all the technologies to do the work as well as to communicate and to collaborate remotely. People are probably not going to completely or permanently change the way they work. The option to work remotely is most certainly going to expand our repertoire in terms of the way we operate.

Rob Daniel

Rob Daniel is a registered Psychologist and a Master HR Professional with SABPP. He has an MA (Psychology) and MS (Management). He has operational and managerial experience in the motor, construction, and food processing industries. He may be contacted on: 082-444-5440 or rdd@intekom.co.za