

## **Remote Work During COVID-19 and Beyond**

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In short order, the name of video-conferencing company, 'Zoom', has entered the English lexicon – partly as a brand, and partly as term to describe the video-conferencing technologies of all flavors that have been experiencing an accelerated adoption rate. Video-conferencing and other technologies are now supporting both our social lives and our work lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remote work has been a developing trend now for some time. But, with the COVID-19 outbreak, the pace of transition has created what Time magazine called “the world's largest work-from-home experiment”. Many companies and employees are fortunate enough to be able to transition much if not all of their on-site work to be conducted remotely during this time.

### **Maintaining Productivity in a Remote Work Environment**

In a recent article, Ernst & Young authors presented some key requirements for maintaining productivity in a remote work environment. These include the following<sup>1</sup>:

- **Implementing remote working in a structural way.**
  - *“Tools are important, but a successful migration also requires leadership, clear guidelines and real commitment.”*
- **Securing the infrastructure for remote working.**
  - *“...requires in-depth security changes and structural adjustments. ...[A]lso requires the commitment of each and every employee to securely navigate their work tools.”*
- **Balancing the work and private lives of employees.**
  - *“...employees experience a blurring of the boundary between work and private life. Early adopters show that this does not necessarily impact productivity, but it does pose a threat to collaboration and communication if left unattended. Actively investing in your employees' well-being therefore is an extra point of attention.”*

The authors further noted some further recommendations for success.<sup>2</sup>

First, companies must define a goal beyond the demands of the current crisis. Examples might include a reduction in office space, optimization of commuting, or the development of a more flexible corporate culture.

Second, it is important to take into account the business culture and unique needs of the company when deciding on the use of new tools. Every company is different, and the most popular and widely adopted tools may not be the most appropriate for any given company.

Third, special attention should be placed on maintaining good employee sentiment to ensure good collaboration: *Company leaders should pay attention to the impact a lack of physical*

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<sup>1</sup> Verbeemen, Eva & Sébastien Bujwid D'Amico. “Why remote working will be the new normal, even after COVID-19”. Ernst & Young. April 9, 2020. Available at: [https://www.ey.com/en\\_be/covid-19/why-remote-working-will-be-the-new-normal-even-after-covid-19](https://www.ey.com/en_be/covid-19/why-remote-working-will-be-the-new-normal-even-after-covid-19). Accessed on May 29, 2020

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

*contact has on people. Companies need to stimulate cooperation between colleagues and monitor togetherness.*

Fourth, companies should incorporate “Data driven methods of analysis to get deeper insights into new learning patterns, employee sentiments, etc.”

## **Remote Work In Practice**

Given the circumstances of the pandemic, it is surely unfair to compare remote work productivity versus on-site productivity; especially from an output standpoint. World economies have been shaken, and many companies are on the brink. The ability to work remotely alone is a lifeline to companies and their employees.

That said, the workplace messaging company **Slack** conducted a nationwide survey of knowledge workers that reveals how companies and employees are responding to a remote work surge. Between March 23-27, Slack “surveyed 2,877 knowledge workers across all 50 states to understand how they’re adapting, what they find challenging and what’s working well.”<sup>3</sup>

- *Industry Suitability*

First of all, there is the issue of which jobs and industries are even suitable for remote work. They note that “[w]orkers in fields such as health care, research, operations, education and customer support are the most likely to say that it’s either impossible or difficult to work from home, while those in business development, product or program management and IT find it much easier to do so.”<sup>4</sup>

Not all of these issues can be resolved; however, respondents in job categories that otherwise demonstrate compatibility with remote work indicated that their companies simply did not have the proper technology setup or protocols. This would indicate that an opportunity exists for more widely implemented remote work across industries.

- *Employee Experience with Remote Work*

In addition to the apparent opportunities for companies to adopt remote work strategies and technologies, a good number of the employees with companies that have are doing so with little experience.

Perhaps the most helpful insights from the Slack survey involve their comparisons of “the experiences of those who’ve worked from home for less than a month, ‘newly remote workers,’ with those who’ve had some experience working remotely, ‘experienced remote workers.’” The vast majority (86%) of newly remote workers say they made the switch because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the survey, about 53% of remote worker respondents were ‘newly remote workers’, while 47% of those working primarily from home were ‘experienced remote workers’. Slack identified three areas as

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<sup>3</sup> “Report: Remote work in the age of Covid-19”. Slack Website. April 21, 2020. Available at: <https://slackhq.com/report-remote-work-during-coronavirus>. Accessed on May 29, 2020

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

particularly problematic for newly remote teams: productivity, employees' sense of belonging and overall work satisfaction.

**Productivity:** *Those new to working from home are twice as likely as experienced remote workers to say that they're now less productive. A majority (60%) of experienced remote workers find working from home to be more productive, suggesting that experience may give workers a boost, even in extreme circumstances.*

**Sense of belonging:** *Newly remote workers are nearly twice as likely as their experienced counterparts to say that their sense of belonging has taken a hit since they started working from home. This is particularly concerning because remote workers also report feelings of loneliness and isolation when working from home. But the answers of experienced remote workers give cause for optimism. Nearly half (47%) say their sense of belonging is better at home than in the office. This suggests that there are practices and tools that can strengthen work relationships remotely; newly remote workers might simply lack access to these resources.*

**Overall work satisfaction:** *Nearly one-quarter (23%) of newly remote workers are less satisfied working from home,...[while] 72% of [experienced remote workers] say that they're more satisfied working from home.*

## Conclusions

In the end, it seems that there are great opportunities that remain for companies to adopt policies and technologies for remote work. Where workers have been able to develop experience with remote work, the results are quite encouraging. The Slack survey indicates that many experienced remote workers have higher levels of productivity, sense of belonging and overall work satisfaction. One might assume that the experience of newly remote workers would also trend in that direction.

Though, for employees with remote work experience, the structural aspects of their work situation may well have been worked out over a longer period of time. It would do companies well to consider the advice provided by the Ernst & Young authors.

The company, Gallop, has reached similar conclusions as those expressed by E&Y. Based on 12 years of studying remote work, Gallop provides some helpful advice on the subject in an April 24 article on their website entitled "*Remote Work Trends to Guide High Performance During COVID-19*".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hickman, Adam & Jennifer Robison. "Remote Work Trends to Guide High Performance During COVID-19". Gallup.com. April 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/309170/remote-work-trends-guide-high-performance-during-covid.aspx>. Accessed on May 29, 2020