

STAYING PRODUCTIVE AND CONNECTED - CHALLENGES OF OUR NEW WORKLIFE

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The events of the last few months have created an enormous cultural shift in our working lives. With the exception of key workers, most of us have experienced both the pressures and pleasures of remote work, and have had to find ways to adjust.

Not only is our work environment different, but communication with our colleagues has had to adapt and our roles and remits may have changed too. While organisations grapple with issues ranging from the purpose and safety of our physical offices, to the maintaining of workplace culture, individually we may be struggling with aspects of our current working lives. For those not returning imminently to regular office work, how do we maintain motivation, meaning and focus when we are isolated from our colleagues and distracted by our home lives?

There are a number of ways in which we can help ourselves stay productive while facing the challenges of home working, as well as help our teams remain connected remotely. Some of these insights may also help prepare us for our eventual return to the office, however and whenever that may be.

CREATING BOUNDARIES

1. Maintaining time routines around our working day can help separate the hours we work from other time. Exercising when you would normally commute, starting and ending the working day at the same times you usually would, sets up a structure around work hours, and stops that time stretching out longer than it should. Data on remote work in the UK since lockdown has shown that our work days tend to be up to 20% longer. This has an impact on both our home life and our state of mind.

2. Setting up a boundary around the place where you regularly work creates a psychological entry and departure point to and from your work environment. Leaving your laptop or putting up a screen around where you sit, for example, helps maintain the separation between work and living space.
3. Scheduling time for deep-focussed, distraction-free work, when your notifications are silenced or your phone is off, allows uninterrupted space for clear and creative thinking. This can not only provide a welcome relief from distraction but also boost productivity, when balanced with periods of collaboration and contact with colleagues.

BUILDING PERSPECTIVE

It is important to give time meaning, when our weekdays seem to merge into our weekends and the effects of the pandemic may feel indefinite. Thinking of the past, and thinking ahead to the future, can be very effective in alleviating stress and motivating us to make the most of the present.

1. Re-wind to the past: Psychologists have shown that, contrary to popular belief, allowing ourselves some detailed nostalgia and warm reminiscing can be good for our state of mind. It can bring positivity and motivation, as well as being calming.
2. Fast forward to the future: Spend some time thinking about how you might want this period to end, what you would like to do when it does, and how you would like to feel when it is over (which will, eventually, happen). Vividly imagining this time counter intuitively helps us think about meaning in the present, and shifts our attention to purpose and hope.
3. Silver Linings: Consider some aspects of your remote working life that you may miss. Despite the stresses, there may have been many and varied pleasures of working from home, such as better family time, no commuting, and greater flexibility. Thinking about these silver linings helps us appreciate them as we experience them, and makes us mindful of our privileges.

MAINTAINING TEAM VALUES

It has been a particular challenge during and post lockdown to maintain connection and motivation within and between teams. Where individuals who are used to working together have had to work separately, away from the workplace and each other, there is the risk of the breakdown of shared values. This has two particular aspects, each of which is important to re-build.

1. Shared identity: In order for teams to feel a common purpose and sense of unity, it is crucial that the team leader and/or members of the team are able to articulate their overarching goals and have clarity on their roles within the team. This builds a psychological safety within the team, helps build trust between its members and forges togetherness. Similarly it connects the team to its culture and history and where relevant to that of the larger organisation. Teams consistently perform better with clear team goals and roles.
2. Shared understanding: Seeing our colleagues in their home environments, perhaps interrupted by family members or pets, has been a particular feature of these working months. While sometimes amusing, it has more importantly humanised our colleagues and increased our empathy for each other's remote working pressures. Understanding the contexts of each other's working lives is not to be underestimated. It builds all-important connection, and helps us understand who our colleagues are, their values, the demands on their lives and their out of work identities.

LONELINESS AND 'RELATIONAL ENERGY'

One aspect of remote working has been the risk of isolation and loneliness. While (at the time of writing) we are no longer in lockdown, and are able to re-establish our social connection, albeit at a distance, many people are alone for many hours of the day while they work from home. Some have also found it hard to reconnect after weeks and months of separation, particularly if social or health anxiety has become an issue. So while it is important to think about productivity and focus in our and our colleagues working lives, we must also remain vigilant about our - and their - possible loneliness. Human connection is what makes us feel not alone, and for some it can be a challenge to maintain that. While we are working apart, we should be mindful of those for whom isolation is more than a physical state.

Interestingly, a recent study showed that when we have positive interactions with other people, whether friends, colleagues, acquaintances or strangers, this creates a positive 'relational energy', which translates to engagement in the workplace, and an increase in productivity and job retention. This may be partly why so many people found the early weeks of lockdown so challenging and depleting. It also underlines the importance of maintaining workplace relationships and connection despite our current worklife distance.

COUNTER-FACTUAL THINKING

The pessimists among us may find this task easier than others: taking time to think about things that could have happened over these past months, but didn't. Many people have suffered intense distress and hardship, but for plenty of others, the current circumstances

could be significantly worse. While this might sound doomsday, it does serve a purpose. It helps us find gratitude in what we have and where we find ourselves. Not only has it been shown that gratitude, even in small things, expressed on a regular basis, can help lift mood and bring hope, but a study also showed that graduates during a recession were more satisfied in their work and jobs 10 years later, having known what it was like to fear unemployment and poor economic prospects. Counter-factual thinking helps us not take what we have for granted.

While we ponder what we can do to help ourselves and our colleagues maintain focus, productivity and hope during the uncertain months ahead, it is equally important for our workplace leaders to recognise the crucial importance of human connection, even as they contemplate the challenging future for our office spaces.

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