

Working from home? Count your virtual blessings

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you are one of the thousands of lucky workers who have been able to make the transition to working from home, amid the ever-tightening social distancing restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, there are blessing to be counted. You still have a job.

But according to UniSA experts in business and management, Dr. Shruti Sardeshmukh and Dr. Chad Chiu, working from home isn't always smooth sailing.

"Working from home can be a challenge for businesses and individuals," Dr. Sardeshmukh says.

"There are a host of both real and imagined hurdles to leap, but if businesses want to support employees and maintain business continuity, they must thoroughly explore their options.

"It is important to solve all the usual hurdles—will the technology work, will your business be able to maintain data security, can employees establish safe and healthy home offices?

"These issues need to be worked through one by one with your expert teams, but new technologies are a huge facilitator for all kinds of creative remote work solutions and open the door to continued productivity in these challenging times."

Dr. Sardeshmukh says building a work environment that extends beyond the traditional workplace is a huge advantage for business in good times and bad.

"In some ways this is a real test of creativity and ingenuity, and it also puts a strong focus on understanding your workforce and how to facilitate their success by enhancing communications and connections," she says.

"Ideally workplaces, should always be focused on these connections, but a lot is taken for granted when staff are physically co-located—going virtual can uncover weaknesses that can be corrected now and will benefit operations when people can go back to business as usual.

"It is also going to give organizations the opportunity to consider how and where virtual working might be effective in the future."

For team directors and managers, leadership when teams are working remotely, has its own set of challenges.

UniSA expert in team leadership and senior lecturer in management, Dr. Chad Chiu says because teams are a collection of individuals, it is important to remember to take actions for the team and its individual members.

"A big challenge when teams go remote is uncertainty—so leaders should set some rules or guidelines for how the team will operate—clarity around meeting times, when to telephone for instant help, flexibility of deadlines and the types of technology you will be relying on, are all important," he says.

"While you need to keep work on track, it is also important to acknowledge that work teams feature both task and relationship-driven interactions.

"Research has shown that both aspects of intragroup interactions are important to predict team effectiveness, so managers should encourage the team to be socially connected and offer each other both relational and task support.

"Take advantage of video conferencing technologies, such as Zoom virtual meeting rooms, to unite the team; set up chat channels for social conversations as well as work interactions; host a virtual lunch or morning tea to support social engagement."

In this brave new world of virtual working, Dr. Chiu says not everyone is equally equipped.

"Virtual collaboration has several limitations which are best overcome together," he says.

"Not everyone will be equally familiar with the technology the team adopts, so managers can encourage team members to help each other to overcome technical difficulties and use online resources to learn how to use unfamiliar meeting and management platforms.

"When leading in this framework, it's valuable to remind yourself and the rest of the team that difficulties will happen. Patience and empathy will go a long way in overcoming challenges.

"Leaders who can acknowledge their own limitations and show how they are willing to adapt and learn with good humor, will signal to the team that you are all in it together and can help each other grow in capacity."

Dr. Chiu says staff adapting to the remote work context need both recognition and assurance from their managers to know they are on the right track. And, managers should pay attention to signs like decreased responses to emails or being absent in group conversations.

"These signals could suggest a team member might need help or encouragement to complete their tasks or they could be struggling with the new [work environment](#) or other issues.

"A one-to-one catch up by phone or Zoom can help the team leader to better understand what might be behind the lack of engagement and offer the support a team member needs."

And there are some key things leaders of remote teams should avoid doing.

"Expecting work to run as it would in the office, with a basic 9 to 5

schedule, is a mistake," Dr. Chiu says.

"Particularly, in the current environment, team members will be juggling a range of circumstances, for example children being at home from school, so it is not realistic or even effective to expect to operate as usual.

"Instead discuss key meeting times and periods where collaboration will be required but be flexible about when other work can be done. This can prove more effective in maintaining the overall productivity of your team and acknowledges and respects that team members may have a range of responsibilities they need to juggle in this new environment."

Provided by University of South Australia

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