

Companies scrambled to set up virtual workspaces. Is this the future?

April 10 2020, by Edmund L. Andrews



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

In the span of a single month, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies and organizations of all types to have almost all of their employees work remotely from home.

Has the future of work, the all-remote workforce and even the virtual

organization, arrived in full force? Though online technologies have made remote work increasingly common, most companies and organizations are still run out of brick-and-mortar facilities. Now they are scrambling to stand up virtual workspaces overnight.

Melissa Valentine, assistant professor of management science and engineering, has spent years studying these issues. Jen Rhymer, who is about to join Valentine as a postdoctoral fellow, has closely studied [software companies](#) that operate entirely independently of a physical headquarters.

The big lesson, they say, is that remote-only organizations pose complex new management challenges. The biggest ones: developing trust, collaboration and information-sharing among people who never meet in person and who may be on opposite sides of the world.

Here are some of their thoughts:

Getting the technology right

It takes more than a laptop, an internet connection and apps like Slack or Zoom. The technology for remote work and virtual teams is straightforward and keeps getting better. The bigger challenge is addressing the human issues. If workers are suddenly working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many will be juggling childcare, noise and a slew of other disruptions. That is guaranteed to cause a drop in productivity, but it will also reduce the intangible benefits of working in the same location. Think here of the informal brainstorming over coffee or the casual exchanges of information. But the issues go deeper: How do you build trust and social ties, which are crucial for creative collaboration?

Being forced by a crisis to embrace remote-only work is different from creating a remote-only workforce at the start

Companies that structure themselves as location-independent have developed norms and practices that bridge the emotional and logistical distances. The same is true for their workers. For such companies, remote-only work can reduce costs, expand the talent pool and boost productivity. By contrast, being forced by a crisis to work remotely is likely to be disruptive and frustrating. It may be better than shutting down, but it will likely lead to a big drop in productivity.

Building trust and collaboration

All companies need to establish a culture of shared priorities and accepted practices for working together. It's easier for traditional companies, where people see each other and interact informally. Remote-only companies often try to fill the void with organized social efforts, from online happy hours to retreats and discussion groups. The topics don't have to be relevant to the business. The goal is to build ties and a sense of community. However, cautions Rhymer, these efforts won't work unless CEOs and senior managers participate as well—as equals, not as bosses.

Executives should also display their own trust by refraining from monitoring their employees on a minute-by-minute basis. They shouldn't eavesdrop on employee emails or chart their keystrokes per minute. The focus should be on the ultimate output, not on a worker's specific activities.

Creating a rich public decision trail

At companies with employees spread across many time zones, real-time conversations and written exchanges aren't often feasible. But people still need to understand the background for how and why decisions were made. With a rich decision trail, all the discussions and debates that lead up to a decision are documented and codified so that people can go back and understand why those decisions were made.

Opening a single source of truth

Workers need access to the big picture about an organization's strategy and priorities, and perhaps even about work in progress that may not be directly relevant to them. It's a repository of information that is clear, uncontested and accepted as true at that time, and then maintained so that it is always current. This is especially true for asynchronous companies, in which people collaborate across all time zones and can't easily discuss issues in real time.

Breaking down the barriers to sharing work

You want workers to post work as it's underway—even when it's rough, incomplete, imperfect. That requires a different mindset, though one that's increasingly common in asynchronous companies. In traditional companies, people often hesitate to circulate projects or proposals that aren't polished, pretty and bullet-proofed. It's a natural reflex, especially when people are disconnected from each other and don't communicate casually. But it can lead to long delays, especially on projects in which each participant's progress depends on the progress and feedback of others. Location-independent companies need a culture in which people recognize that a work-in-progress is likely to have gaps and flaws and don't criticize each other for them. This is an issue of norms, not tools.

Preparing for the future. The experience of cobbling together a remote-

only system on the fly is likely to be chaotic and unpleasant for many people. Technology makes it easier than ever to be location-independent, but unless companies focus on creating an effective remote-work experience, don't count on workers falling in love with it after the pandemic. Is remote work the wave of the future? It depends on how organizations respond today.

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Companies scrambled to set up virtual workspaces. Is this the future? (2020, April 10) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-companies-scrambled-virtual-workspaces-future.html>

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