

Remote work amid the coronavirus pandemic: 3 solutions

April 6 2020, by Jean-Nicolas Reyt



Remote work can be a difficult adjustment for teams accustomed to working in an office setting. Here are some tips. Credit: Charles Deluvio/Unsplash

As part of the fight against COVID-19, Canada is urging "[employees at all work sites ... to work remotely whenever and wherever possible.](#)"

Although we might find comfort in thinking switching between office and remote work is mostly an IT problem, [three decades of management research on telecommuting](#) tells us that the real challenges are just

starting.

Thousands of teams across Canada are going through the difficult transition of redefining the way they function. How teams tackle these challenges will have profound consequences on their productivity and the well-being of their members. Below are three challenges teams will face, and practical recommendations on how to mitigate their effects.

Redefining communication norms

Office workers share a large amount of information in person—they stop by each others' office to get advice, clarify expectations over coffee or gather by the water cooler to talk. Research shows that [informal discussions help employees understand what's happening on their teams and keep feelings of isolation at bay.](#)

Teams that switch to remote work need to craft new communication norms that fit their new context. Team members should not be afraid of over-communicating at first, even if it feels wrong to do so.

For example, calling a co-worker over the phone several times in a row might be frowned upon in an office context but is perfectly acceptable for teams switching to remote work.

New communication norms can only emerge from experimentation, and experimentation means trial and error.

Managing work-life conflicts

Office workers are used to keeping their work and their [private lives relatively separate in space and time](#) (meaning they work at the office during [work hours](#), and live life privately at home the rest of the time),

which helps them limit conflicts between the two. Our sudden switch to remote work erases these boundaries, which blurs our responsibilities.

New remote workers, especially those with dependents, need to redefine the relationship between their work and their personal life. In order to limit conflicts and interruptions between the two, remote workers should negotiate with their managers a creative schedule that balances both responsibilities—for example, by alternating work and family responsibilities throughout the day.



More phone calls than normal is acceptable when navigating remote work.
Credit: Unsplash

Once set, employees should communicate with their co-workers *when* and *how* they can be reached for work matters.

Further, new remote workers who do not have a home office should refrain from working in areas that they typically use for relaxation, like a bed or the couch, as tempting as it may be.

Instead, they should reorganize their homes and use table or a desk in a quiet space as their workstation. Here as well, family members should be informed that this area is dedicated to work only.

Rethinking what supervision means

When we cannot see an employee work, we might suspect they're not pulling their weight. Although certain jobs involve quantifiable work outputs that could alleviate these concerns, many do not. A project manager, for example, might only issue one deliverable every few weeks, which limits the opportunities for monitoring.

Managers will face the important challenge of redefining what supervising employees means in the context of remote work.

A common mistake managers make is to compensate for lack of direct observation by closely monitoring how remote employees do their work. This strategy is doomed to fail because managers don't know everything that's going on in the lives of remote employees. For example, an [employee](#) might decide to work on a weekend to compensate for taking care of a sick child during the week.

Instead of focusing on how employees work, supervisors should explain to them why their work is important. In uncertain times, employees might forget what their work actually means, especially if the context has changed.

[In my research](#), I find that people who focus more on *why* they work are more likely to explore new creative possibilities in their work than people who focus more on *how* they work.

In short, switching from traditional office work to remote work is a fundamental change in how teams function.

The challenges listed above will take time to resolve, and misunderstandings are to be expected. For this reason, we should be forgiving of one another during this experimentation period and focus on establishing effective work norms for our new normal.

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