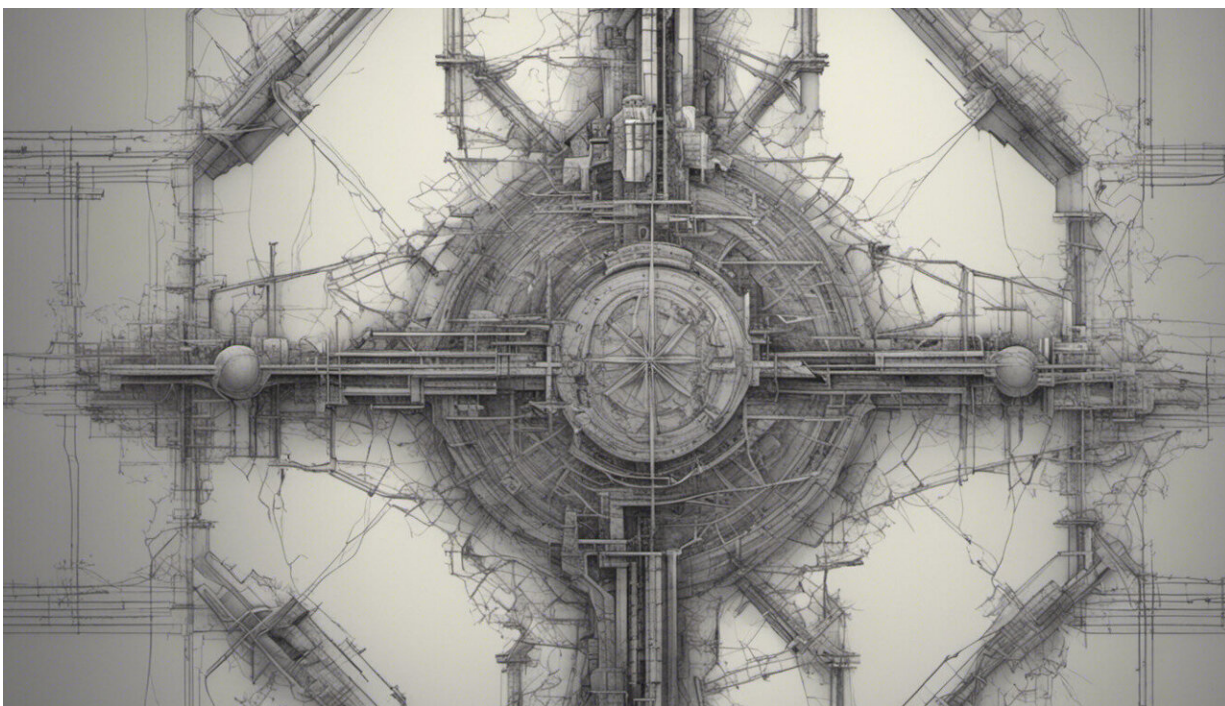


Remote work has built—rather than broken—trust among colleagues

November 13 2020, by Badri Zolfaghari



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

The COVID-19 crisis has forced a massive shift towards remote work. What are the implications of this shift for trust in the workplace? Such trust plays a crucial role in how we [coordinate](#), [cooperate](#), [reciprocate](#), and respond to [risk](#) and uncertainty. So, just as the need for trust in the workplace is heightened by the severe uncertainty wrought by

COVID-19, the massive shift towards remote work may undermine this trust.

This concern is shared by many. A simple search on the social media platform LinkedIn results in over 70,000 posts about trust and remote work. Numerous companies are trying to respond. Some are seeking to instill confidence in employees that they are trusted. Others are increasing surveillance as a mechanism to control their workforce from afar.

An underlying premise is that remote work threatens trust in the workplace. But there are reasons to believe that remote work may actually help build trust, too.

In their seminal paper on trust in organizational settings, management and organizational psychology scholars Roger Mayer, James Davis and David Schoorman identified three pillars that inform how we assess others' [trustworthiness](#): their ability (skills to successfully conduct a task in a given domain), their benevolence (having good intentions), and their integrity (having acceptable principles and values).

Each has been affected by our collective shift to remote work. Remote work has enabled us to have a new-found appreciation for skill acquisition, particularly under pressure. We have been put in a situation that enables us to more readily display our good intentions. Finally and most importantly, we witness the manifestations of our shared values in a more transparent way. All of which contribute to increase our trust.

Remote work and trustworthiness

Turning first to ability.

Many of us have had to shift to online modes of teaching, facilitating,

consulting, managing, coaching and workshopping. This brings a new appreciation for the effort and dedication it has taken to learn new skills in such a short time, and under challenging circumstances. Something as simple as being able to see others (albeit virtually) struggle to run a new software on their device for this first time, while trying to keep the flow of the meeting going, gives more malleability to our perception of what it means to have domain specific knowledge. Many of us have become more empathetic towards not getting things right the first or second time around. That might not necessarily negate our trust in our colleagues' ability.

Then there's benevolence, or assessing others' intention. This is surely not easy in a virtual space? Not so. One thing we have come to appreciate during these difficult times is the need for [connection](#) – and the feeling that we are a part of something. With all the obstacles that have been put in our way during these past months, signaling that we have good intentions towards our colleagues could have been as simple as '[showing up](#)'. Colleagues are showing up in meetings from their homes, despite diverse personal challenges such as home-schooling or caring for elderly parents. This is often fostering empathy and a shared sense of mutual '[good intentions](#)'.

Lastly, to the question of integrity. We struggle to trust someone when we don't align with their values and principles. When interaction with our colleagues becomes limited both in scope and domain, it's difficult to assess and interpret what their values are, and how deeply they are held.

But our struggles with maintaining our work-life sanity have made something clear, and that is, we have more values in common than we think. Generally we have shown that we prioritize health over wealth, love and connection over competition, well-being of family and loved ones over personal gains, hope over despair, resilience over resignation,

and much more, as evidenced by the Dutch historian and man who famously confronted billionaires for tax evasion at the [Davos](#) summit in 2019, Rutger Bregman. [Bregman's](#) tribute to our [better nature](#) contends that human nature is, at its core, decent and good. And in times of turbulence and collective challenge, that decency reveals itself even more.

The current circumstances have created an opportunity that would not have been there otherwise. For example, during our virtual meetings—whether cameras are on or off—we have shown and seen vulnerability, prioritization and a display of core values that were unlikely to have been evident in normal office settings. Tapping into these shared values can have positive and lasting effects on how we maintain and develop trust with our colleagues in our workplaces.

On a broader level, trust has been shown to be in decline at a [national](#), [institutional](#) and [organizational](#) level. But in our day-to-day lives, on the personal level, we have an opportunity to build stronger trusting relationships that can ultimately permeate our organizations, institutions and our nation states.

COVID-19 may have posed a threat to this [trust](#), but it has also provided ample opportunity and we must not lose sight of this.

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