STRENGTHEN YOUR CONNECTION TO REMOTE EMPLOYEES

Experts offer tips and advice on using technology to better support and engage your remote workforce.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, organizations around the globe were forced to redefine how their employees communicate and work. While remote work used to be offered by some companies as a way to offer a more flexible lifestyle to their employees, it has now become the norm for most businesses.[1] Looking ahead, it's likely that remote work arrangements will become standard for some enterprises, either as a permanent solution or as an element of a hybrid approach.

Examples abound. Pinterest went from 35 offices to more than 4,600 individual employee offices in less than a month and has no plans to return to the old working model. Job-search giant Indeed told all 10,000 employees to remain remote until July 2021. Twitter told employees they could work from home indefinitely. Currently, **more than half of Americans want to continue working remotely,** while two-thirds of companies may render their current work-from-home policies permanent.[2]

"With the increase in remote work, organizations previously concerned about supporting a remote workforce have had to overcome their fears and concerns," explains Craig Benson, Vice President of Technology at Raley's, a regional grocer in Northern California and Nevada.

While organizations had to scramble initially to translate their operations into a remote work model, there is now an opportunity to take a step back and consider how to better leverage technology to support and engage remote workers. Here, industry experts offer advice and tips.

According to Reworked, more than 80% of business today is transacted online.

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1   https://blog.smarp.com/remote-work-20-ways-to-engage-and-connect-with-your-remote-employees
2   https://www.businessinsider.com/companies-asking-employees-to-work-from-home-due-to-coronavirus-2020

Consider the Work Environment

For months, the primary consideration for remote work was whether employees had laptops and could access the applications they needed. Today, more thought is going into defining all elements associated with an ideal remote work environment.

For example, Raley's realized it needed to provide all the mobile technology required for its employees to be effective. That included replacing bulky laptops or desktops with tablets and updated software. It also involved making key decisions related to introducing digital resilience into people's homes — the ability to maintain or recover technology-dependent operations.

The issue of resilience is linked to an employee's "digital experience," which, of course, can also be connected to the customer's experience. An employee who is processing a transaction or providing service cannot afford to be knocked out of the system or lose their connection to the customer. Such instances cause frustration on both sides.

Typically, Mr. Benson says, these are "concentrated capabilities in the office that now have to be addressed by a service or solution that can be used in both the office and the home."

Organizations should also think about any gaps created by employees working remotely. That's where collaboration and communication tools come into play. Beyond specifics of how to run payroll, you have to decide how employees can interact effectively. That rests in understanding your business processes and what they do.

"Make sure the remote technology solution can meet those business needs so they can be successfully executed. Consider ease-of-use, costs, and security to get them up and running. Once you know how to meet the needs of the business, then you'll have a framework for picking the right tool," Mr. Benson says. Of course, as the pandemic wears on and remote work takes hold, major software manufacturers are also updating their features to better address the range of needs that enterprises have identified.

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Another area to evaluate is how (and where) employees work within their homes.

"That 'last mile technical space' has to be considered, as does the entire workspace," says Mr. Benson. "There's often work to be done to ensure proper posture. Sitting on your couch is not sustainable long term. You have to ensure that the space is compatible with being effective. That includes not only assessing their computing environment, but practical aspects like headsets, chairs, and desk height."

"From a technology perspective, in addition to making sure business operations are running effectively, you have to ensure your information security remains a critical part of the overall solution. With people working remotely, there are things you can't control. You have to take that into consideration. So, if your organization doesn't have a policy and strategy in place, they need to develop one to support a remote workforce," he says.
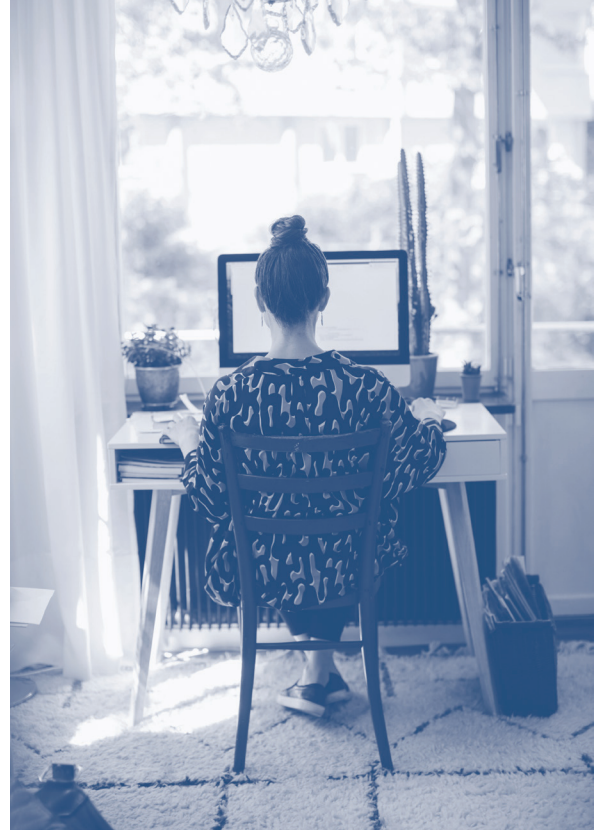
Focus on the Digital Experience

An article on Reworked.com cites that **74%** of companies increased their focus on supporting or improving the digital experience as a result of COVID-19, and **73%** made financial investments in the resources to support it and **55%** said their digital experience initiatives were accelerated because of the pandemic.

https://www.reworked.co/digital-workplace/building-digital-resiliency-for-the-post-covid-world/

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Keep Lines of Communication Open

Experts point out that most organizations have worked through the big issues that arose from the shutdown, like transitioning to a remote workforce, having the right tools, and figuring out how to balance work and life. But a new issue is emerging — that of employee burnout.

As one industry leader describes, "Employees are worried about being productive, so they are signing in earlier and staying online later." Even when they are encouraged to take time off and return to a more normal schedule, they feel "guilty" because they are splitting time between work and family. If you see a similar pattern in your workforce, partner with leadership and Human Resources to develop programs, tools, and communications that will reassure employees.

"In high-stress environments, and not just during a pandemic, you have to ensure that the organization is taking time to reach out to team members and ask how they're feeling," says Mr. Benson. "Leadership needs to open up the lines of communication to remind employees that they're not alone; we're all in this together. It's a dialogue, not a monologue, so you have to have conversations with your team members. None of us are robots."

To support open communications, deploy real-time messaging applications that can be used by team members for a variety of situations, whether it's for urgent questions, lighthearted banter, or recognizing colleagues.

Carl Malone, Principle Product Manager at Hughes Network Systems, says it's critical to maintain this type of organic employee engagement, so workers feel as if they're still in the loop. That also applies to associates who may have been furloughed.

"Some managers have been calling their employees once a week to check-in. Personal outreach matters. Avoid email if you can and stick with face-to-face meetings and discussions even if they have to be virtual," he advises.

Many experts recommend regular touchpoints, along the same lines as the "daily stand-up" meetings that are common in the IT industry.

"You can schedule a mid-morning daily stand-up on video to have a quick conversation. It's closer to real-time communications, the type supported by Slack, MS Teams, and Zoom," Mr. Benson says.

"It's important for leadership to stay in touch with team members, not to the degree of surveillance software, but to stay in touch throughout the day, to move beyond email, and work as a cohesive unit rather than just as individuals linked by the manager."

"Daily Zoom meetings, where everyone has to be on camera so we can see each other, have been key to engaging our employees. At first, people thought it was annoying, but over time there has been a dramatic shift. It's now essential to maintaining the structure of our team and our connections," Mr. Malone says.

"I think the biggest lesson I've learned about leadership from the pandemic is that my team likes seeing the real me. They have more respect for me today than they did prior to the pandemic because I've been open, and I've been real!" one expert notes.

Be Prepared for Change

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that change can happen overnight. For that reason, organizations are advised to continue taking time to understand their remote workers' needs and remain flexible and willing to shift.

"Things aren't necessarily going to go right the first time, and they're not going to stay static, so you have to be ready to adjust to changing situations." Mr. Benson says.

Mr. Malone agrees. "We learned quickly that if we always do things one way and we never rethink a solution, it'll hurt us. You have to continually examine and innovate what's possible. You have to think far enough down the road, not just look at the immediate changes on the horizon." And each time you implement change, be sure your team members receive adequate training on how their jobs will change.

Working remotely is not the same as doing a job in the office. Yet with a focus on leveraging technology, you can redefine how work gets done and strengthen your connection to remote employees.

Even before 2020, Employees Saw the Many Benefits of Working from Home.

Increased Retention

95% of employees say telework has a high implact on employee retention.

Reduces Attrition

46% of organizations that permit telework say it reduces attrition.

Appealing to Baby Boomers

74% of older Americans would want work flexibility and 34% would like to work from home.

Increased Interest from Millennials

68% of millennials say their interest in a prospective employer would surge if they could work from home.

Less Down-time

Teleworkers typically return to work faster following medical issues or surgery.

Cost Savings

37% of 1,500 technology professionals said they would take a pay cut of 10% to telecommute.

Source: Global Workplace Analytics

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