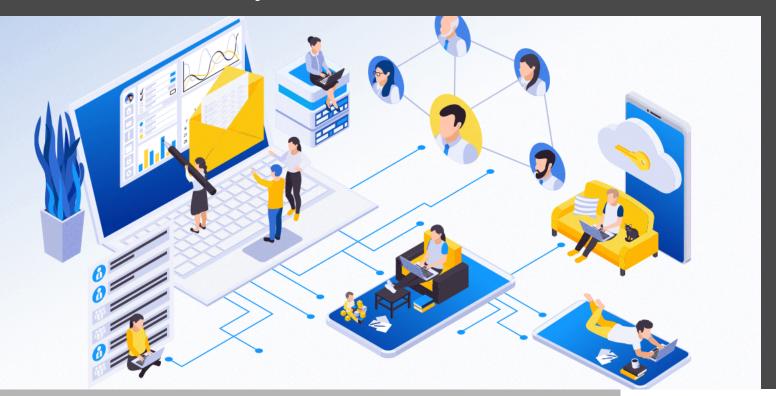# Devolutions

How Remote Working Is Permanently Changing the Business Landscape

SOME ASPECTS OF LIFE ARE NEVER GOING TO BE THE SAME AGAIN

For more than a year now, people have been craving a "return to normal," both professionally and personally. And while there is reason to be cautiously optimistic that things are stabilizing, some aspects of life are never going to be the same again — like remote working.

The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of Remote Working

For the last decade and a half, remote working has surged in popularity. In fact, between 2005 and 2018, remote working opportunities grew 173% — which was 11% more than the rest of the workforce. The reason for this growth? Remote working is beneficial for employers and employees alike. For example, research has found that:

- Employers save an average of $2,000 in real estate costs for each remote worker.

- Remote workers are on average more productive than in-office workers.

- Companies that offer remote working experience a 25% lower turnover rate.

- 51% of remote workers say they are more productive working from home.

- Remote workers are 35% to 40% more productive than their in-office counterparts.

- 71% of remote workers say they are happy at work compared to 55% of on-site workers.

- Remote workers take fewer sick days than their in-office counterparts.

Despite these benefits, in 2016 and 2017, some organizations — including notable enterprises that had long-since offered remote working opportunities like IBM and Yahoo! — started reeling in their remote workers. Why? Well, it was rooted in a belief among executives (or sometimes just a single executive) that in-office employees collaborate better and more often than remote workers. However, this position has been criticized as being shaky at best, and misguided at worst. Here is what TechRepublic declared in June 2019:

Indeed, whatever your company policies, I'd hazard a guess that much of the real collaboration within the company happens online, whether through text-based media like email or through video conferencing. In a company of reasonable size, it's unlikely that every employee is going to be in the same office, necessitating «remote» collaboration even if the company policy is against remote workers...It's time to abandon the «must be here» workplace fetish. All it does is complicate hiring without significantly improving employee collaboration.

It is possible — and maybe even probable — that if things had continued as expected, the business landscape would now be characterized by a growing anti-remote working sentiment. But as we all know, things didn't continue as expected. In early 2021, the coronavirus pandemic exploded, and almost overnight remote working became essential. In fact, as bad as things have been for so many organizations and employees, it would be exponentially worse without remote working.

And now, as we have some valid reasons to believe and hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we can see that remote working is definitely not going to fade away. Instead, it is going to remain a permanent and significant option. **Consider the following:**

- [82% of executives surveyed](#) intend to permit remote working some of the time as employees return to the workplace.

- [Several major companies](#) have announced that they will let many employees work from home on a permanent or long-term basis even after the pandemic is over, including Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Facebook, Shopify, Square, Slack, Group PSA, and Box.

- [29% of employees surveyed](#) said they would quit if forced to return to the workplace on a full-time basis after the pandemic is over.

While the future is hard to predict — especially these days — we can clearly see that remote working, which only a few years ago was being maligned and reduced, is now here to stay and will only become more prevalent.

And so, what are the implications of this shift? **There are three core areas in which remote working is permanently changing the business landscape: management, workers, and security.**

How Remote Working Is Changing Management

The pandemic has rapidly — and for the most part without any training — thrust many leaders into remote management, which requires a different skill set than face-to-face management. As [Harvard Business Review](#) points out: "Some managers may be finding their roles more difficult than before — and making their subordinates' lives more stressful as they struggle to adapt."

To help with this transition, here are five tips for managing remote workers during and after COVID-19:

1. Pay Attention to Signs of Stress and Burnout

A [recent survey](#) has found that the majority of remote workers are not working less than their contractually-required hours. Instead, they are working more. Granted, in some cases, this is not a negative thing. But in other cases, it is not a positive development — because it means that remote workers could be under increasing amounts of stress and headed for burnout.

While managers cannot be expected to solve all challenges and problems, they should use every opportunity to express and demonstrate that their subordinates are valuable, supported, and cared for. Ensuring that individuals and teams are recognized and rewarded for "going above and beyond" can go a long way towards boosting engagement. These rewards do not necessarily need to be financial, either. For example, taking a minute for the team to applaud a colleague or group during a virtual meeting can be a highly effective and meaningful gesture.

2. Keep Remote Workers Informed of Organizational Changes

Research has found that, contrary to conventional belief, employees do not necessarily have to agree with organizational change in order to accept it. Instead, what matters most is that they understand why the change is happening. In light of this, managers should keep remote workers informed of imminent and proposed changes that both directly and indirectly impact their work experience — even if the development is unwelcome.

At the same time — and without micromanaging! — managers should clarify role definitions, and be vigilant about ensuring that the right people are doing the right things. They should also focus on documentation. In an interview for LinkedIn's Talent Blog, Darren Murph, the head of remote working at Gitlab, advised: "One of the most sizable challenges when going remote is keeping everyone in the loop in an efficient way. Put concerted effort around systematically documenting important process changes in a central place to minimize confusion and dysfunction."

3. Ensure that Remote Workers Have the Tools They Need (and Know How to Use Them)

At the start of the pandemic, one of the biggest challenges was that remote workers were not prepared to work from home for an extended period of time. While the situation has improved significantly since then, some remote workers still don't have all of the tools and equipment they need. According to ZDNet.com, at the very least remote workers should have all of the following in their toolkit: remote desktop software, real-time communication apps, video conferencing platforms, project management software, time management software, and security software (e.g. anti-malware, anti-virus, VPN, etc.).

Furthermore, managers shouldn't assume that all remote workers know how to use these tools effectively and to their full capacity. Some do — but others may not. It is important to proactively reach out and, if necessary, provide training resources (e.g., video tutorials, webinars, how-to articles, Q&A forums, etc.).

4. Focus on Outputs vs. Process

One of the biggest challenges for managers when they shift to a remote work paradigm is adjusting their focus from processes to outcomes. In other words, in most cases what matters is what remote workers produce and the quality of their work, and not when they do it — provided, of course, that their schedule does not obstruct or adversely impact colleagues or any other aspect of the organization.

And speaking of adverse impacts: Gartner points out that employee misconduct can surge by as much as 33% during periods of uncertainty. As such, while managers need to trust their remote team and give them the autonomy they need, they cannot be neglectful. If there are allegations or suspicions of inappropriate behavior, then managers need to look into the matter in a professional manner (i.e., discreetly, honestly, respectfully, documenting everything, fully complying with employment laws and best practices, etc.).

5. Foster Innovation

A survey of executives found that while productivity across their remote teams has remained the same or increased during the pandemic, the level of innovation has significantly declined. Managers need to play a critical role in creating a "safe space» for their team members to introduce new ideas, suggest improvements, and experiment with new and better ways of working.

How Remote Working Is Changing Workers

While some people have been working remotely for many years — or even many decades — the pandemic has created a whole new generation of remote workers who are either experiencing it for the very first time, or who are experiencing it to an unprecedented degree (i.e., they worked remotely a few times a month in the past, but now they're doing it all day every day). And just like some managers, not all remote worker "newbies" are thriving. Instead, some are struggling and suffering.

Here are five tips for new remote workers to help them embrace vs. resist remote working:

1. Over-Communicate Accomplishments and Issues

People who enjoy and prefer to work without much fanfare, or without much attention, may find that this formula is counterproductive in a remote working context — because their colleagues and manager may not know what they're doing, when, or why. This can lead to confusion, inter-team conflict, and re-work.

To avoid this pitfall, remote workers need to over-communicate vs. under-communicate. This means proactively bringing up their achievements (not in an arrogant way, but in a professional way), and escalating any problems or issues. Often, when it comes to remote working, "silence isn't golden." Rather, it's counterproductive.

2. Create a Routine (but Remain Flexible)

One of the most challenging things for new remote workers is sticking to a routine — not because they are spending too much time lounging around or surfing social media, but because there are so many distractions in the home environment: kids, pets, and an endless list of household chores.

While it is easier said than done, remote workers who want to be effective and avoid exhaustion need to develop a routine that ideally aligns with two things: the expectations of their team and manager, and their own personal style (i.e., some people are naturally more productive and alert in the early morning, while others hit their stride later in the day). Using a good time management app can make a major difference. Here is a list of some recommended solutions (both paid and free).

Now, with all of this being said, it is possible to go to the other extreme and get locked into a routine. Remote workers need to find a balance between a structure that supports them, and at the same time enables them to be flexible and pivot when it is beneficial or necessary to do so.

3. Connect with a Positive Community

Despite the fact that most people prefer to work remotely — and as highlighted earlier, a significant proportion have said that they would rather quit than permanently return to the corporate environment — research has found that many remote workers experience loneliness and isolation.

And it should be quickly added that, despite conventional belief, this is not about extroversion vs. introversion. A recent study found that there are two types of workers who are struggling more than their counterparts and colleagues in a remote work setting. The first group is composed of workers who are driven to maintain positive relationships with others, and who have a lot of empathy. These people are energized by connecting and working harmoniously and in alignment with others. The second group is composed of workers who are highly conscientious and self-aware, yet feel anxious and fearful under pressure — because the home environment (even if it is very conducive to productivity and privacy) does not provide the same level of structure and support as the corporate setting.

To help bridge the gap, remote workers (including but not limited to those in the groups noted above) should connect with a positive community, where they can share knowledge, insights, tips, jokes — and so on — and re-create, to a limited but still meaningful degree, the in-office camaraderie that they are missing.

By the way, if you are looking for an amazing and highly supportive community, then we invite you to join Devolutions

Force! It's free, fun, and you can earn points to redeem for great prizes. Click here for more details. You can also participate in our popular monthly poll question and join the discussion for any article — just comment below!

4. Optimize Your Workspace

Before the pandemic, some people who occasionally worked from home used their kitchen table or some other ad hoc area. While this wasn't ideal, it just didn't make practical or financial sense to invest in a proper, functional, and ergonomic workspace. However, things are very different now. Remote working is here to stay — at least to a significant degree (i.e., 3-4 days a week at home, 1-2 days a week in the office).

As such, remote workers need to optimize their workspace so that it facilitates rather than impedes productivity, engagement, and privacy. The good news is that some companies are covering the costs for items like desks, chairs, noise-canceling headphones, etc. If this isn't an option, then most remote workers should be able to claim any legitimate at-home office furniture or equipment on their taxes (remote workers in the U.S. can click here to learn more, and those in Canada can click here to learn more). We advise all remote workers to consult with a qualified tax professional before making any claims.

5. Prioritize Self-Care

A study has found that during COVID-19, remote workers have been working an average of three hours more per day when compared with pre-pandemic levels. Unfortunately for many people — especially those who are new to the remote working landscape — this is not because they are energized and enthusiastic. Instead, it is because they are struggling to achieve work-life balance.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution that deals with this widespread problem. However, remote workers can move towards restoring and maintaining work-life balance by making it a priority to eat healthy, nutritious, and properly timed meals, and by following a medically-approved fitness routine. We also recommend "deskercising," which are stretches that remote workers can do throughout the day. Staying hydrated is also very important. Check out these handy apps that provide little desktop/mobile device reminders when it's time to take a sip of water, tea, or any other work-friendly beverage.

How Remote Working Is Changing Information Security

In the early days of the pandemic response, many organizations were obligated to accept new risks to keep

operating, including reduced information security control and standards. Now, as workers, customers, and third parties (e.g., supply chain entities, strategic partners, etc.) adjust to the changes, these residual risks must be tightened. As noted by McKinsey: "In the next normal, cybersecurity will be embedded into new processes and technologies as a strategic imperative rather than as an afterthought. It is therefore more important than ever that cybersecurity leaders understand the ongoing changes in how their business is creating value."

Here are five tips for organizations to strengthen their information security posture to govern a remote workforce:

1. Enhance Cloud Security

The surge in remote workers has dramatically accelerated the popularity of cloud-based apps and platforms. Organizations need to strengthen cloud security by deploying multi-function authentication (MFA), privileged access management (PAM), and real-time end-user monitoring and logging. They should also securely offboard departing users.

2. Fortify the Weakest Link: End Users

End users have always been — and will always be — the weakest link in the information security chain. Now that the attack surface is much larger due to remote working, organizations need to establish, roll-out, and enforce threat detection programs and policies beyond their corporate environment and into home offices. For example, remote workers need to have secure home wireless networks, and it may also be necessary to restrict the sharing of company-owned devices with family members. We also strongly recommend providing all end-users with ongoing cybersecurity awareness training, which can be facilitated through online training platforms.

3. Use a Virtual Private Network (VPN)

To protect their remote workforce, organizations should view VPNs as mandatory instead of optional. However, it is important to note that VPNs are not optimized for security out-of-the-box. Key ways to strengthen the level of VPN security include: implement MFA, use the OpenVPN protocol, test for leaks (DNS, IPv6 and WebRTC), use a kill switch, use a network lock, limit VPN access to specific and authorized end-users, and consider using an intranet or extranet (with MFA) instead of a VPN for access to highly sensitive files.

4. Implement Single-Sign On (SSO)

Each time a remote worker (or any other end-user) logs into an application, a door is opened for hackers to potentially invade endpoints and networks. SSO enables end-users to log in once with a single set of credentials, and therefore access all of the apps, data, and websites for which they have permission. SSO can help reduce password fatigue, prevent shadow IT, support compliance, and accelerate the adoption of desired apps. It can also help reduce IT workload (due to fewer password reset requests) and enhance end-user productivity. Of course, for SSO to be secure, the master password/passphrase must be unique and strong.

5. Strengthen Supply Chain Security

Cloud acceleration also means larger supply chains with more entities — and as SolarWinds/Solorigate showed us, this inevitably creates more risk. Organizations need to mitigate the possibility that they might be attacked due to the vulnerability, incompetence, or negligence of a third-party. Key strategies in this area include conducting rigorous vendor evaluation (look for credible proof of robust information security control, such as SOC 2 Type II and the ISO/IEC 27001:2013), implementing Zero Trust architecture, enforcing the principle of least privilege (POLP), auditing and monitoring privileged accounts, taking a defense-in-depth approach, and implementing segregation of duties.

Looking Ahead

Even the most confident prognosticators and pundits are hesitant to predict what the future will hold — because if 2020 taught us anything, it is to expect the unexpected.

However, we can be sure that on the business landscape remote working is here to stay (in one model or another). As such, it is wise and necessary for managers, workers, and organizations to proactively make adjustments. That way, they can head into the future with clarity and success — instead of getting dragged into it kicking and screaming.