



Essential Guide

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## Covid-19: Three steps to remote working effectiveness

Staff are going to have to work from home, if they can, for the foreseeable future. We look at steps to ensure they remain fit and productive

Cliff Saran, Managing Editor

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When Forrester surveyed 76 organisations that had invoked a business continuity plan in the last five years, 14% said there had not been enough training and awareness efforts across the organisation. The survey also found that in 11% of organisations, plans did not adequately address company-wide communication and collaboration.

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Although there is a mantra to have people work from home, research in the US from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that just 29% of employees who could work from home chose to do so. Forrester principal analyst, JP Gownder, said: “Until this crisis, organisations were very averse to people working from home, and in certain jobs like finance or healthcare, regulations prevent data from leaving a site.”

For Gownder, the idea of remote working has become a real-time experiment, which [puts considerable strain on the network](#), testing the limits of local loop connectivity. “The telcos don’t plan for this many people to be using video conferencing,” he said.

## Engage with staff as friends

Working remotely for long periods of time will inevitably test people because there is a need for human contact. [Margaret Heffernan](#), CEO mentor and lead faculty for the Forward Institute’s Responsible Leadership Programme, said: “People have always underestimated how social work is. We all love to hate the boss and have meetings, but at work you are part of a gang. You are with people you like and are used to seeing them. That matters a lot.”

In Heffernan’s experience and the companies she has referenced in her new book, [Uncharted: How to map the future together](#), she said that when businesses go through a crisis, people keep supporting the organisation because of the friendships they have at work.

“People are not loyal to the company,” she said. “They motivate each other to have ideas.” Over the long term, said Heffernan, studies have shown that remote working can have a negative impact on employee productivity. “Business leaders want to get rid of expensive real estate, but people who have done this a long time say they lose a lot.”

For instance, a study Heffernan ran for Novartis found that although staff could communicate with each other using online conferencing, people need to be brought together to rebuild bonds. “It is really motivating for people to believe they belong to part of something,” she said. “Online communication doesn’t create relationships.”

## Tackle the coffee break challenge

In 2010, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology published [Productivity through coffee breaks: changing social networks by changing break structure](#), which looked at callcentre handling at a US bank.

Heffernan said the study split a callcentre team into two groups. In the first group, call centre staff took their coffee breaks individually, while the second group had shared coffee breaks. The research showed that by giving employees breaks at the same time, the strength of an individual’s social groups increased and the strength of an individual’s social group was positively related to productivity (average call-handle time) for the employees studied.

In essence, people work better collectively. Heffernan said an organisation represents a group of people who can do things more effectively as a collective than if they worked alone. For instance, [Bell Labs engenders a culture of helpfulness](#) that has enabled it to become a highly productive organisation.

But for Heffernan, the self-imposed isolation that can exist either at home [while working remotely](#) or in an open-plan office, where people routinely wear headphones to avoid distractions, does not improve employee productivity or encourage greater collaboration.

## Manage distractions

[Charles Towers-Clark](#), chairman of Pod Group and author of [The Weird CEO](#), said: “Covid-19 has been like watching a slow-motion car wreck. We have an office in Hong Kong. My colleagues there have had to work from home for two months. Thankfully, because people take initiative when they need to, it has been business as usual for us.”

Towers-Clark said organisations should use the measures being imposed by the government to control the spread of coronavirus as an opportunity to [change the way they work](#) permanently. “Companies are going to have to trust staff to work from home, work with staff to set objectives, what needs to be done,” he said. “This is an opportunity for the mindset of work to change. It would be a real pity if companies go back to working the way they used to.”

## Read more about managing remote workers

- Remote working is very common in tech companies and IT departments. How can it be managed to [optimise productivity](#) and keep employees socially connected to their companies?
- Ken Charman has a track record in running IT firms. In 2018, he was coaxed out of retirement to spearhead [Unilever’s spin-out software business](#).

As the schools close, Towers-Clark said: “It is very easy to be distracted at home. Those staff with children will have to spend a lot more time with their children. So it is really important for managers to set objectives and allow people to work on what they want, when they want. This needs to work across the organisation. Everyone needs to understand what everyone else is doing.”

For Heffernan, the risk of remote working is that everyone is trying to work so efficiently that they do not care about each other.

Following two weeks of home working at [Microsoft, the company posted a blog on what it had learnt](#). “To help our employees, we’ve started offering virtual meditation sessions they can join when they need a moment to unwind from work,” Microsoft wrote in the blog post.

When the risk of Covid-19 goes away, said Heffernan, “I suspect people will want to go back to the office.”

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