Remote Work is a Trend with Staying Power: How Employees and Managers Can Succeed in this Brave New World

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I have been working remotely—in one form or another—since 2005. My boss at the time allowed our team to work 1 day from home if we kept it hush-hush. It wasn't until 2015 that my employer moved to a formal telecommuting policy, allowing 3 days of remote work. Suddenly, after 15 years of navigating the DC Metro traffic scene daily, I only made the trek to work 2 days a week. My quality of life improved in ways I couldn't have imagined.

The pandemic spurred an entirely new arrangement—starting in mid-March 2020, our entire company was fully remote, staying that way for the next 2 years. Things changed for me again in January 2022 when I became the managing director of Origin Editorial, a remote-only company. Finally, after more than 2 decades in the workforce, I had complete control over how and when I worked. In this article I'll share with you the true value of remote work, how to maximize its effectiveness, and the best strategies for managing a remote team.

A NASA Physicist Advocates for Telework

In 1973, NASA physicist Dr. Jack Nilles coined the term "telecommuting," which he defined as "the substitution of telecommunications and/or computers for commuting work."[1] Dr. Niles was particularly interested in how telecommuting could address several societal and business concerns such as commuter traffic, healthcare costs, and worker productivity. As a remote worker himself, he made a persuasive case for the arrangement in his 1994 book titled *The Telecommunications-Transportation Tradeoff*.

Despite Dr. Nilles's convincing arguments for telework, the idea of working virtually was slow to take off. Over the course of the next several decades, the invention of personal computers, the Internet, WiFi, and tools like Slack and Zoom,

remote work slowly took hold. Federal government policy also helped remote work gain a foothold in the American workplace—the 2010 Telework Enhancement Act[2] required all federal executive agencies to establish a policy allowing eligible employees to telework. The legislation supported the more-than 100,000 federal employees already engaged in a remote-work arrangement.[3] Private companies and non-profit organizations took note, and many established their own telework policies.

It wasn't until the COVID-19 pandemic that remote work made significant gains. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of people primarily working from home tripled from 5.7% (~9M) to 17.9% (27.6M), according to a 2021 American Community Survey released by the US Census Bureau.[4] The share of remote-work opportunities also jumped—at the start the pandemic just 4% of jobs were remote; in 2023 that number is at 15%.[5] And prior to the pandemic, only 5% of paid workdays were from home; now 30% of paid workdays are from home.[6] In particular, the knowledge industries—finance, information technology, and communications, for example—have been affected by the shift, with workers in these sectors finding the transition to remote work organic.

Wearing PJs to Work is Nice, But Remote Work Offers So Much More

For those of us who've had the opportunity to work remotely, we've long understood its value and benefits, beyond the cliché of wearing "business on the top and pajamas on the bottom." With so many of the world's population forced into remote work during the pandemic, millions of people experienced first-hand these advantages for the first time. While many of them are obvious, some are less so—below is a look at what employees can gain from remote work.

Reduced Commute Times

For anyone who lives in a major metropolitan area, getting to and from work can sometimes take hours, depending on the time of day, weather conditions, and day of the week. Remote work affords employees the opportunity to cut hours of wasted time on the road, leading to improved physical and mental health. On the financial side of the commute,

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FlexJobs estimates that we spend $2,000-$5,000 annually on getting to and from the office and up to $2,700 on lunches.[7]

Preferred Location of Residence

I've known many colleagues over the years who've chosen to live in more affordable locations thanks to being able to telework. With lower costs of living, they were able to reside in dwellings of their choosing versus having to settle for less. Furthermore, and I observed this especially throughout the pandemic, remote work allows people to relocate closer to their families, which provides a natural support system they may have been without previously.[8]

Higher Levels of Engagement and Morale

Research shows that employees who spend at least part of their time working remotely show higher levels of engagement and morale over those who do not ever telework.[9,10] They are also the most likely to feel as though they have someone at work who cares about them as a person and encourages their development. And surprisingly, they are the most likely to say they have a best friend at work.

Increased Opportunities for Inclusion

For those with chronic disabilities or illnesses, getting into an office on a daily basis can be incredibly challenging. Remote work provides these individuals with the opportunity to have meaningful careers. In fact, an October 2022 report by the Economic Innovation Group found that individuals with disabilities between the ages of 25 to 54 were more likely to be employed in 2022 than before the pandemic thanks to more remote-work opportunities.[11] Good remote work policies can also accommodate the needs of other underrepresented groups so they don't have to make inequitable sacrifices. Research has found that people from historically underrepresented groups are more likely to prefer remote work, citing the ability to live in welcoming communities, higher senses of belonging, and less harassment.[12,13,14]

Greater Levels of Productivity

According to Owl Lab's 2022 State of Remote Work report, 62 percent of workers feel more productive when working remotely.[15] The reason for this could be that teleworkers report having more opportunities for focused and independent thinking, as well as fewer distractions from colleagues. The reduction in commute time also often translates to working more hours than when in the office.

How Can You Maximize Your Work-From-Home Arrangement?

If you're anything like me, remote work has taken a little getting used to. I've come a long way from sitting at my kitchen table on a dial-up modem, single-screen laptop, and being driven to distraction by barking dogs, ringing doorbells, and friends and family who think working from home means "working" from home. Now, decades in, I've developed a tightly managed approach to remote work that allows me to maximize productivity and demonstrate that employees who telework are engaged and valuable members of the workforce. What strategies can you employ to effectively work from home (Figure)?

Set Boundaries—Both Literal and Figurative

If space allows, establishing a physical space in your home for work allows you to "walk away" from your job at the end of the day. It also signals to others in your household that this is your workspace and to respect certain rules around it.[16] Even with minimal space you can set up dividers, curtains, or other visual cues that this space is dedicated for your work area. It's also important to set other types of boundaries—for example, having a consistent start and stop time each day so you don't find yourself working at all hours of the day, as well as taking lunch and coffee breaks away from your desk. Moreover, set boundaries with those in your household who might also be home, enforcing the idea that they can't repeatedly interrupt you with requests and questions.

Practice Good Meeting Etiquette

Who hasn't been in a Zoom meeting where someone is clearly busy doing something else (e.g., checking emails, writing a text, speaking to someone in the background). This can be incredibly distracting and shows a lack of respect for others in the meeting. While it's tempting to multitask during video calls, it's important to remain focused on the meeting at hand.[17] Try to keep background distractions to a minimum, make eye contact, and while this certainly doesn't seem to be the norm, keep yourself OFF of mute when possible. It can be disconcerting when the normal subtle sounds of being heard and understood aren't present when everyone is on mute.

Connect with Colleagues

Something that is obviously missing in remote work are the spontaneous conversations that happen in an office. It's important, therefore, to be deliberate in connecting with your virtual colleagues.[16] Reach out to them for a Zoom coffee break or take a few minutes to chat with them over Skype or Teams. At the top of meetings, instead of jumping straight into the agenda, take a few minutes to ask questions about their day or weekend. Participate in virtual team-building activities that your company offers so that you can get to know people personally.

Tips for Working from Home

TIP 1
Set Boundaries

Try to establish a physical space for working, set a start and stop time, and have clear rules for interruptions from others at home.

TIP 2
Practice Good Meeting Etiquette

Stay focused during meetings, keep background distractions to a minimum, and avoid multitasking. Maintain eye contact and keep yourself off of mute, when appropriate, to increase engagement.

TIP 3
Connect with Colleagues

Be intentional about knowing your virtual colleagues personally. Schedule coffee breaks or take time to chat over instant messaging.

TIP 4
Make Yourself Visible

Don't become "out of sight, out of mind." Update team of your progress on projects. Be explicit that you want to be considered for promotions and raises. Keep your camera on as much as possible and be consistently available to your team.

Figure 1. Keys to successful remote work.

Make Yourself Visible

One of the harsh realities of working remotely is that research has shown in-person workers may be more likely to be promoted.[18] That's why it's critical you don't fall into the "out of sight, out

of mind" category. Be explicit with management that you want to be considered for raises and promotions. Also, keep your supervisor and your team abreast of your contributions to projects and developments on any work you are doing. Try to make yourself easily accessible by being responsive to emails and instant messaging and keep a consistent schedule so your team knows when they can reach you.

Managing A Remote Team

The unique strategies to effectively manage a remote team came into stark relief when the publications team I supervised became fully remote overnight in March 2020. While we had all worked remotely for several days a week for years, we had never all been remote at the time for an extended period. I quickly learned that managing a remote team is very different from managing an in-person or even hybrid team.

Experts suggest, and I can attest to, managers must be deliberate in their communication efforts with a remote team. It's important to communicate regularly and to also determine what types of communication each person on the team prefers—for example, some might want video drop-ins or phone calls, others might prefer routine check-ins, and yet others might like to use chat. Understanding what communication styles your team members prefer, as well as the frequency, will lead to greater trust and accountability.[9]

Also critical is holding regular team meetings, which, when virtual, require a bit more skill than in-person team meetings. Managers should take a little extra time to show interest in their team members, as well as make eye contact and encourage participation.[19] This means asking team members who have been on mute to express their opinion on a specific topic—sometimes people find it challenging to break into discussions in virtual settings.

You'll have to work harder at creating a team culture with a remote team. Unlike in an office space, where culture is often built on the physical space itself, dress, and behavior, culture in a telecommuting environment needs to be built on intuition and with deliberation.[20] As a leader of the team, it's critical that you set the tone and invest in establishing the right culture.

Parting Thoughts

Remote work, for all of the benefits and value it provides, is not without its shadow side. If not managed properly, it can lead to a blurring of boundaries between work and home, social isolation, lack of the right equipment and support, and presenteeism, which is when you don't take sick days as needed but instead work through illness. Telework can sometimes even result in health issues, such as feelings of depression from

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social isolation, stress from overworking, and the emergence of musculoskeletal problems due to sitting long hours without breaks.[9] These disadvantages can be managed, however, with an intentional approach to remote work. Now that we've been thrust into this brave new world, I'm confident we'll become increasingly skilled at finding the right strategies to effectively work from home and managing remote teams. After all, someone has to keep the pajama business booming.

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