Employers' guide to working, recruiting and onboarding people remotely from home

Contents

Remote hiring and remote working:
Advice for 2020 and beyond

INTRODUCTION

Remote hiring and remote working are fairly new challenges for many companies, but ones that are likely to increase in the coming years.

According to our 2020 European Consumer Industry Salaries, Skills & Benefits Report, 25% of our sample already work remotely on a regular basis and 34% enjoy an agile working environment – working when, where and how they choose. What's striking is that two-thirds of respondents consider agile working their preferred scenario.

Certainly, the COVID-19 crisis has led to unprecedented levels of remote working worldwide. And while this is a temporary state of affairs, the impact of the virus will likely change how we live and work for many years to come.

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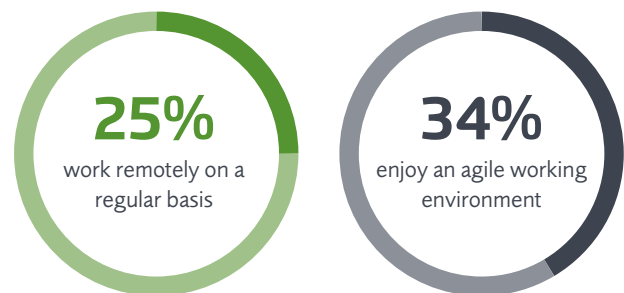
Companies that hire remote workers or allow employees to work remotely as part of their normal schedule, report various benefits including:

- Increased productivity
- A positive impact on employee health and wellbeing
- Significant cost savings
- A larger and diversified talent pool
- Ease of doing business in multiple time zones
- These advantages are only possible, however, if employees adopt the right behaviours, attitudes and approaches to remote working. Managers have a critical role to play in ensuring that happens – creating the right environment for remote work to take place and embedding remote work 'thinking' into hiring and leadership strategies.

In this white paper, we offer advice and guidance for companies and employees transitioning to a remote working scenario.

Inside you will find chapters on:

- Remote hiring
- Video conferencing software
- Video interviews
- Remote onboarding
- Managing remote teams
- Tips for working from home
- Working at home with kids

How you can **adapt the recruitment process**

Remote hiring requires companies to adjust key elements of the recruitment process, update employee policies and invest in relevant technologies. These modifications ensure firms enjoy successful remote hiring campaigns and appoint people capable of making an impact in a remote working environment. Below are 5 ways employers can adapt the recruitment process for remote hiring.

1. WHY YOU SHOULD CONSIDER REMOTE HIRING

The ongoing COVOID-19 crisis may have forced your company to focus on remote hiring for the next few months. However, the number of people working remotely across Europe was increasing anyway. Businesses of all sizes continue to take advantage of new technologies to offer remote working opportunities to employees. And the advantages of a remote or agile workforce are already well documented. Companies that allow employees to work 'where, how and when they want' are reporting the following benefits:

- Increased productivity
- Positive impact on employee health and wellbeing
- Significant cost savings
- A larger and diversified talent pool
- Ease of doing business in multiple time zones

2. THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Job adverts can be vague sometimes, relying on hyperbole and marketing-speak to attract a broad pool of talent. While this strategy may work in a traditional recruitment setting, when it comes to remote hiring, clear statements about the role and company are essential. Consider:

- Advertising the job in remote hiring forums such as **We Work Remotely**, **Remote OK** or **Remotive Jobs**.
- Making sure adverts include the right keywords (e.g. 'remote job', 'working from home', etc) too so that the job is easily found on search engines and the job site.

3. EMPHASISE YOUR REMOTE WORKING CULTURE

Highlighting the company's remote culture and the value it places on remote working will make you stand out. This is especially the case for 'remote-friendly' firms – those that have gradually introduced remote working policies over time. Competing for talent against 'remote-first' businesses i.e. those that have employed remote workers since day one, means working harder to sell your remote working proposition.

Any promotional activity should include:

- Job requirements, expectations and duties
- Details about your remote policy
- The rationale for why the position is remote rather than office-based
- Information about communication, collaboration and logistics tools related to the role

4. GET THE WHOLE TEAM INVOLVED

You're the boss and have been building successful teams now for several years. Your eye for talent and your intuition about a person's 'fit' is unmatched within the business. Only you can decide who to bring on board.

Scrap that thinking right now.

Yes, it's always a good idea to involve members of your team in the hiring process. When remote hiring, though, you need a much deeper insight into candidates' skills, personality and experience.

Interrogating soft skills like intuition, self-motivation, time management, etc. is difficult at the best of times. Getting the views of colleagues early in the process will give you a detailed and diverse assessment of these qualities – and better results.

5. PREPARE FOR A PROLONGED PROCESS

It often takes companies longer, on average, to complete a remote hiring process than it does to find office-based staff. You could be looking at several months rather than a matter of weeks before your new employee is in the role.

Distance and virtual communication are obstacles in themselves, but it's the difficulty in getting to know someone from afar that frustrates the project. Don't compromise, though. Be patient and anticipate a lengthy process.

Establish realistic timelines and be creative with stages too:

- An additional 'home task' as part of the interview process will give you a better understanding of how they work
- Or, offer a 'trial day' to really test compatibility
- Candidates should enjoy multiple communication touchpoints to keep them engaged
- And longer interviews will help you get to know people better

6. CONCEIVE SPECIFIC REMOTE HIRING QUESTIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

Soft skills are the making of a great remote worker. We've already mentioned intuition, self-motivation and time management as important qualities to look for in candidates. Assessing someone's competence for communication (especially written), consistency, proactivity, decisiveness and self-discipline should also factor into the remote hiring process.

Create questions and assessments to tease out these qualities. Role-playing, for example, is a proven soft skill assessment method.

And interview questions could include:

- What's your remote working experience?
- Why are you attracted to a remote working career?
- How do you organise your working day?
- Do you use any organisation, collaborative, or project tools e.g. Asana?
- Tell me how you stay focused?
- Describe what a healthy work environment looks like to you?
- What methods do you use to stay in touch with colleagues?

Don't under-evaluate hard skills either. You must ensure your new hire can hit the ground running from a technical perspective with little or no additional training.

7. BECOME A MASTER VIDEO INTERVIEWER

Remote hiring isn't possible without adequate investment in video interviewing technology. You need to research the available tools on the market and choose one which meets your needs.

The chapter on **video conferencing software** is a great place to start.

Once you're happy with the tech, you need to adapt your interviewing style. A video interview will never truly simulate the experience of meeting someone face-to-face. Because of this, different preparation is required. We've provided some **tips for candidates on** page 9 that interviewers will also find useful.

Additionally, you should 'arrive' in the virtual meeting ahead of your candidate. Allow for a period of 'small talk' too, to help them become accustomed to the format and set-up.

A note on diversity

The issue of unconscious bias means job interviews sometimes fail to offer an inclusive experience. Any attempt by interviewers to ignore preconceived views of gender, age, race, appearance, or social class, for example, can make these biases more prominent in their minds.

Remote hiring helps recruiters overcome this obstacle:

- Getting the whole team involved in the interview process, means it will be a more inclusive experience overall.
- And by utilising video conferencing software, you can easily gain insight from peers in different parts of the world too.
- Recording interviews also allows you and others to review and critique footage, therefore minimising the impact of unconscious bias.
- Without the worry of making travel arrangements, candidates with disabilities can focus more on how best to demonstrate their capabilities.

8. BE CREATIVE WHEN ONBOARDING REMOTE WORKERS

Ok, so your remote hiring process was a success and you've hired a perfect remote worker. Now the real engagement starts.

- Aim to 'over-communicate' during a remote onboarding process

- Set your remote worker clear early objectives

- Review their progress regularly

- Ensure all technical support and administration is a hassle-free experience

- Send gifts and friendly messages from the team and/or the CEO

- Assign them a buddy or mentor to help them stay engaged and adapt quickly

Read our **essential guide for remote onboarding** starting on page 12.

Usual hiring activities	Remote hiring activities
Enigmatic language to attract broad pool of talent	Clear statements about role and company
Advertise on traditional job sites	Advertise on remote hiring forums
Role-specific keywords	Remote-specific keywords
Emphasise employer brand	Emphasise remote culture and rationale
In-person interview	Video conference interview
Limited team involvement	Multi-person interview process
Test role-specific soft skills	Test remote working soft skills
Standard interviews and process	Longer interviews and additional stages
Company presentation, tour and introductions	Gifts, virtual tour, video introductions

Essential **video interview** tips

Video interviews are common in today's global talent market. Whether it's due to geographical boundaries, time constraints or self-isolating, the hiring process increasingly involves real-time candidate interviews via platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Teams or Google Hangouts. While this technology helps recruiters simulate a traditional face-to-face interview, candidates should be aware that different preparation is required to ensure their video interview is a success.

Below are some essential video interview tips, as recommended by our consultants.

VIDEO INTERVIEW TIPS

Choose the right setting

Whether it's at home, in an office or at another location, always make sure that you choose a private setting for the video interview, where there'll be no disruptions.

QUIET AT ALL TIMES

If you're at home or in a private office/room, shut all the windows to prevent inappropriate background noise. Tell your family or whoever you share the space with to respect your privacy and needs. And make sure your pets are kept in an area as far away as possible.

BRIGHT LIGHTS AND NO CLUTTER

Lots of natural light is ideal. Complement this by activating any lights in the room, to ensure the image is clear. If the projection is still dark or dim, try bringing additional lamps into the space to create a brighter view. Don't silhouette yourself with the window behind you.

Tidying the room is good for your overall concentration. And ensure any surfaces in camera-range are free of clutter.

A neutral view is sensible. Don't try to suggest aspects of your personality by leaving specific items or pictures in focus. Everyone's assumptions, tastes and interests are different.

It's acceptable to have a pen, notepad, your resume and any reference notes with you, as well as a glass or bottle of water.

DRESS APPROPRIATELY

Colours, patterns and stripes are out

Whether you aim for a blouse and jacket combination, or collared jumper ensemble, be sure to avoid bright colours during a video interview. Patterns and stripes are distracting too, so interrogate your wardrobe in advance and only select softer solid shades. Always get fully dressed. Yes, only your head and shoulders are visible. But a complete outfit will put you in the right frame of mind and avoid any embarrassment if you did unexpectedly have to stand up.
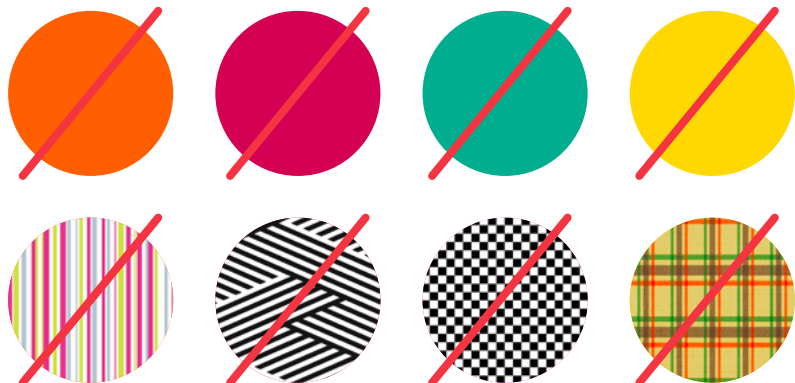
MAKE WISE TECH CHOICES

Basic equipment

- Invest in equipment/software yourself, borrow from friends or rent it if you need to, but try to have the following technology as a bare minimum

- Download and/or subscribe to a video conference provider

- An internet bandwidth speed of at least 1 megabit per second

- A webcam or a laptop, desktop or another device with an inbuilt one.

- The same applies for microphones. You may consider using headphones with a built-in microphone

THE SET-UP

Adjust your chair and always angle the camera to ensure you're staring at the centre of the screen, looking up slightly. Close unnecessary web browser windows, documents and applications. Postpone any software auto-updates.

Mute any notification sounds on your devices – that includes placing your phone on silent mode or in another room altogether. Create a professional username on your video conference provider.

Plug your equipment in or make sure it's fully charged. Test everything – audio, visuals, connection – well in advance, and on the day, to facilitate an issue-free video interview experience.

BE ENGAGED AND POSITIVE

Hands, mouth and eyes

Your body language during a video interview is very important. Even the best technologies and video conferencing software can't erase the fact that participants are in entirely different places.

So, instead of eye contact, try to look directly at the webcam when speaking. Nod and smile regularly when listening to the interviewer. Subtle hand gestures are good but don't flail around or touch your face.

Keep your note-taking to a minimum. If you're a fidgeter, maybe hold a pen to keep your hands still. Sit upright, with your feet on the floor.

Speak clearly, don't interrupt

There may be a time lag. But even if communication is instantaneous, it's harder to follow a video interview conversation if you're not speaking clearly. This format means it's easy to disrupt someone when they're talking too. Practising will help you avoid this common video interview pitfall.

HAVE A BACK-UP PLAN

Faulty tech

All the above advice can't protect you from unexpected occurrences. First and foremost, acknowledge the problem. Whether it's that the image isn't clear, or the sound is poor, don't try to continue as if nothing is wrong. If the technology fails, ensure you exchange phone numbers with the interviewer beforehand so you can reschedule for another time.

Unwanted interruptions

They could happen and if they do, apologise immediately and ask the interviewer for a few moments until the interruption (e.g. a noise outside) has passed. If it involves you getting up to remove a pet or family member from the room, suggest to the interviewer that you'll mute your microphone or turn the camera off until the situation is dealt with.

Video conferencing software

Enhanced video conferencing software has facilitated a significant increase in home working practices in recent years. And as companies become more in tune with ways to improve employee health and wellbeing, boost productivity, meet environmental obligations and the needs of an ever global customer base, we expect video conferencing software usage to continue rising.

Recent global developments have, of course, forced companies to utilise video conferencing software perhaps quicker than anticipated. Below we consider some of the best available tools for connecting remote employees and mitigating against unexpected disruptions.

1. SKYPE

Those uninitiated with the world of video conferencing software will likely turn to Skype as their first port of call. The chances are, you've probably used it to speak to family and friends at some point. But the platform offers great features for business communication too. It's an app or browser-based tool. So, if you want to get on and use it quickly, you can simply register online for free and invite people to a video conference using their email address.

Up to 10 people can join a browser-based video session. If you go ahead and download the Skype app, the free version allows up to 50 participants. Larger companies may use Skype for Business. This is a paid-for upgrade that allows up to 250 people to video conference simultaneously. Though, this platform is being phased out over the next couple of years and replaced with Microsoft Teams (See below).

Some of Skype's key features include:

- Good voice and video quality (depending on internet speed)
- Screen sharing options
- Automatically blur backgrounds
- Live subtitling of conversations
- Ability to record chats

2. MICROSOFT TEAMS

Launched in 2017, Microsoft Teams is a remote working platform combining workspace chat functionality and instantaneous multi-person video conferencing. It's included in Office 365 business accounts and an obvious 'cost-effective' solution for companies with existing Microsoft subscriptions.

A free version has recently lifted user-number and data storage restrictions. The 1 month free trial has been extended to 6 months too. Teams now also allows you to add participants from outside of your company's network and include them in video conferencing sessions.

Maximising the potential of Teams is only really possible for companies that operate in a Microsoft environment. Some critics also point to aesthetic issues vis-à-vis the design being too formal and compartmentalised.

Some of Microsoft Teams' key features include:

- Fully integrated with Office 365
- Launch video conferencing sessions via chat groups
- Invite guests from outside company network
- Collaborate on the go across multiple devices
- Excellent cybersecurity standards

3. ZOOM

An emerging competitor to the larger established players, Zoom offers high-quality easy-to-use video conferencing solutions to meet business needs. A free version allows up to 100 video conference participants. And like Skype, it has browser as well as App-based platforms. Plugins for Outlook and Chrome also facilitate scheduling and administration.

Restrictions on the free version mean video conferences with more than three people are limited to 40-minutes long.

Upgrades are competitively priced and enable uses to connect with Skype for Business, so participants on both platforms can interact. The 'business' option operates on a cost per-host basis and requires a minimum of 10 hosts per company. Up to 200 people can join video conferences on this model and there's no limits to how long sessions can last.

Some of Zoom's key features include:

- Secure encryption
- Application sharing
- Whiteboarding and annotations
- Recording meetings
- HD video

4. CISCO WEBEX MEETINGS

Webex is another established player in the video conferencing market. Eric Yuan, the founder of Zoom, was an engineer at the business during the 1990s. It was acquired by Cisco Systems in 2007.

Like Microsoft Teams, it offers video conferencing as part of a wider suite of collaborative tools. App and browser versions are also available. Though, the former delivers a superior overall experience.

A free version allows up to 100 participants, including 25 simultaneous feeds. Simply registering online provides you with a personalised URL used to invite people to video conferences.

For additional features including cloud storage, transcriptions of recordings, analytics and troubleshooting services, various price plans exist. Although costs have declined in recent years, they are still high compared to other providers.

Some of Webex's key features include:

- Minimal voice and video lag
- 25 simultaneous video feeds
- HD video
- Screen sharing
- Impressive performance and encryption

5. GOOGLE HANGOUTS

Originally part of Google+, since 2013 Hangouts has been a standalone Google product. It can be accessed by anyone with a Gmail account. And the basic Hangouts Meet feature facilitates video conferencing sessions for up to 10 people.

App and browser versions are available. And because it's fully integrated with other Google platforms, scheduling via Calendar is easy.

Subscribers to the enterprise edition of G-Suite enjoy additional Hangout features. They include unlimited storage, recording to Google Drive, and meetings of up to 250 people. Since March 2020, however, access to G-Suite has been available for free. This is to assist businesses and schools around the world impacted by COVID-19. The offer will remain in place until July 1st, 2020.

Some of Google Hangouts' key features include:

- Speed and convenience
- HD video
- Built-in screen sharing
- Stream video calls via YouTube
- Intelligent Muting

How to **onboard people remotely**

Competition for talent has led companies today to look further afield for the best people. This often means finding ways to remotely onboard new hires. Distributed companies – those that have no physical location, and where employees are based remotely in all different parts of the world – are on the rise too. And the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has seen a general increase in remote onboarding practices.

Whatever the context, businesses of all sizes are finding creative ways to onboard remote workers. Below are some tips to ensure your remote onboarding process is a success.

YOU START BEFORE THEY START

Get tech in place

The last thing you want is your employee spending their first few days in the job going backwards and forwards with your IT team, setting up equipment and troubleshooting issues. Ahead of their start date, make sure you:

- Deliver all necessary hardware to your new hire including basic kit like Laptop, Mouse, Keyboard, Monitor, etc

- Determine their Wi-Fi capacities too, and whether they need a VPN

- Ensure they have access to bespoke or licenced company software, any log-in details they need, computer security guidelines, as well as additional instructions for setting up their workstation

These latter points are particularly critical for companies that operate a BYOD (bring-your-own-device) policy.

Make admin easy

All remote staff need to meet legal and regulatory requirements before they start. Again, you mustn't leave this too late and clog up someone's time during that first week on the job. Employment contacts and other legal documents are notoriously time-consuming – this is especially the case when people must print, scan and post them. So:

- Investigate legally binding tools like DocuSign and HelloSign now and integrate them into your hiring process

- Send pertinent information such as an organisation chart, indicating who in the business your remote worker should reach out to for specific issues, and to arrange their various induction sessions

SEND GIFTS AND POSITIVE MESSAGES

A common onboarding practise is to provide new employees with gifts on their first day in the office. Gestures like this are even more important when your new hire is a remote worker. And this could be something you align with the delivery of technology – how happy will your recent recruit be if they receive a mysterious beribboned parcel with their shiny new laptop? It could be:

- A branded coffee cup

- Headphones

- Gift cards

- Local cinema tickets

A friendly (written or video) message from the team and/or the CEO is another great way to make someone feel welcome.

CREATE AN ONBOARDING PORTAL

Once you've got some remote onboarding experience, you might consider developing an online portal. This will become a 'one-stop-shop' for all onboarding administration, communication and induction materials.

Even if it only includes the basics, it's going to make your remote workers' early days in the business much easier. Consider:

- Employee handbook
- Organisational chart
- Training materials
- Workstation set up guides
- Marketing templates

Populating and updating this ahead of the new hire's start date will ensure all bases are covered. Some companies take advantage of applications like Slack for this purpose if a bespoke solution isn't possible.

CLARITY AND CONNECTIVITY FROM DAY ONE

Clear early objectives

If your employee is a remote worker, they're already going to have bags of initiative and expertise in managing their time effectively. It's still important, however, to set clear tasks and give them purpose early on – make them feel like they're having an impact and contributing to the wider team.

- As well as immediate role-specific priorities, getting them involved in larger projects is a great way to introduce them to team members or the wider business
- Training too could involve tangible tasks that enable remote staff to get used to systems and ways of working
- Leverage their initiative and encourage them to pick up the phone or organise video conferences with colleagues, to ensure diaries are super-busy those first few weeks

REVIEW PROGRESS REGULARLY

As well as setting short and long terms goals, it's essential to monitor and review the progress of remote workers during the onboarding period. This, at the very least, should include one-to-one virtual meetings on a weekly basis, to discuss projects, priorities and expectations.

Scheduling training is difficult at the best of times, but it's important that specific training for remote workers always goes ahead as planned. And make sure you touch base with them afterwards to find out how it went.

Remember, remote employees can become 'out of sight, out of mind.' Don't neglect them during those first few weeks. Consider extending a typical onboarding process to ensure their progress remains consistent over a prolonged period.

ESTABLISH A MENTORING OR BUDDY PROGRAM

This is another classic onboarding initiative, but it's one that can easily be neglected in a remote working context. All efforts to make your new remote employee feel connected to the organisation will help in their long term development.

Assign them a buddy or mentor and encourage the buddy/mentor to use video conferencing technology to interact with the remote worker during the onboarding process. This can include:

- Taking them through company procedures
- Giving general advice and guidance
- Facilitating introductions to other people in the business
- Organising virtual coffee-catch ups and informal chats
- If the buddy/mentor is office-based, they could even give virtual tours to bring the company culture to life.

Tools and tactics for managing remote teams

If remote working scenarios continue to become 'the norm' for businesses, leaders need to adapt their management style and approach. Here we consider the best ways for you to excel at managing remote teams.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE ISSUES AND PITFALLS OF REMOTE WORKING

Before you can embed solutions, you need to first understand the potential problems when managing remote teams and mitigate against them. It's common for leaders to feel:

- Like they have no control in a remote working scenario

- That people may not work as hard or as efficiently at home

- And engaging with them and building trust will be especially difficult

Your worries, aside, from the employees' perspective, people who work remotely often:

- Express frustration with a lack of communication and management support

- Struggle accessing information, even if it's just answers to simple questions

- Suffer from isolation which can harm mental health and impact performance

ESTABLISH SEVERAL AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION

When managing remote teams, you need to get creative around your use of communications technology.

- Email is definitely out and instead, you should investigate solutions for different scenarios including one-to-one's, team meetings, workshops, and virtual socialising

- **Video conferencing tools** (Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts) should be at the heart of your strategy. These are ideal for one-to-one's or smaller team meetings, as they facilitate intimate and personal interactions where visual cues offer clarity and help build rapport

- Consider using instant messaging applications (Slack, Zoom, WhatsApp) too. Instant messaging is more visible than email, and it encourages immediate, faster and less formal interactions. Emojis and gifs are permitted within reason

- And remote whiteboarding and other collaborative tools are also important. Ensure employees can share ideas and documents with minimal fuss

SET EXPECTATIONS AND HAVE A CLEAR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Engagement shouldn't be ad-hoc. Be clear when communication will take place, as well as what you expect from remote employees regarding working patterns, appropriate behaviours, and performance. During a **remote onboarding process**, you should maintain regular contact.

A daily catch-up is ideal. The frequency of this can diminish over time, of course, but a weekly one-to-one should be a bare minimum moving forward

- Team get-togethers should follow a similar pattern, and make sure your remote worker is always included in all relevant group virtual interactions

- Give remote employees a sense of purpose by setting clear objectives and focusing on output rather than activity. And show your support and build trust by acknowledging the unique challenges they may face e.g. working at home with kids

GET PERSONAL

Traditional manager/employee relationships should usually maintain a degree of separation between the professional and personal. This approach can be relaxed when managing remote employees – especially during a time of crisis and forced isolation. They're going to look to you for guidance and reassurance more often.

- Always be available via Slack, Skype, etc
- Augment the impact you have as a leader, by engendering closer bonds than normal – ask about their family, find out what common values and beliefs you share, and discuss their anxieties and concerns
- All the while offer positive affirmations and encouragement
- Longer one-to-ones should factor in 'small talk' and conversation about non-work matters.
- Furthermore, never cancel an appointment with a remote worker, and practice **video conferencing techniques** to avoid common pitfalls.
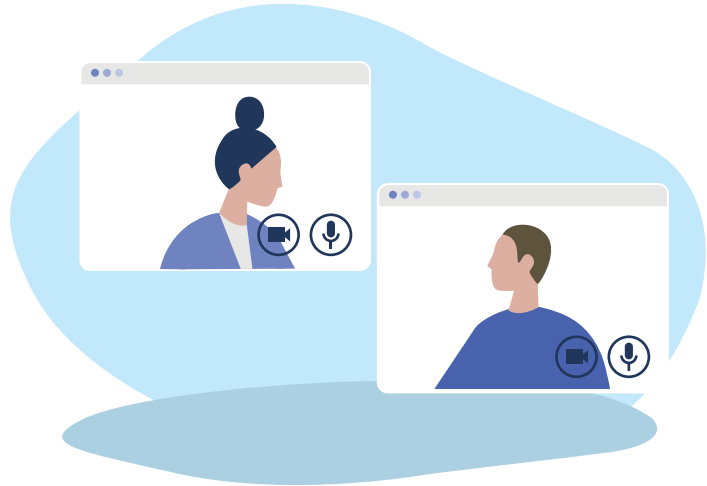
EXTEND INFORMALITIES TO THE WHOLE TEAM

Every team is different when it comes to social interaction. As a leader, you should facilitate these activities, bearing in mind the level of frequency people in your team want or expect.

Your role as facilitator is even more important when managing remote teams. While you may enjoy a more casual relationship with remote workers, it's essential that they get to 'let their hair' down with other colleagues too, even if it's in a virtual setting. Propose:

- Virtual coffee or lunch dates
- A virtual lunchtime quiz
- Virtual end-of-the-day drinks, or even
- A full-scale virtual office party with food/drinks packages delivered in advance

Any of these events require excellent video conferencing platforms, so liaise with IT to ensure whatever tool you use guarantees maximum reliability, security and quality vis-à-vis the context.

Remember, the aim is to have fun and instil a genuine sense of community and camaraderie amongst peers.

How to stay healthy and happy
whilst working from home

Home working is no longer an occasionally luxury but a permanent reality for many people – at least for the next few months. Because of this, employees require working from home tips to help them adapt to this evolving situation. We've summarised the best ones below.

ESTABLISH A ROUTINE

When it comes to working from home tips, establishing a routine and sticking to it is the most important one. Psychologically, it's tough to motivate yourself when home-based rather than in the familiar office environment. The best way to switch your brain into work mode is by recreating a typical working day, as best you can. So...

- **Leave the house in the morning**: Yes, that's right. Get up, get dressed and go through the process of 'travelling' to your place of work. Whether that means going for a brisk walk or run, make sure to leave the house as normal, and arrive back home in time to start your working day.

- **Adopt your usual schedule**: That includes taking coffee breaks and your lunch at the same time. Make sure your breaks involve time away from your screen, in a separate room too. Work (as best as you can) only during your normal hours. And try to end your day by doing a regular non-work activity - anything which helps draw a line between your professional and personal life.

- **Create a plan and stick to it**: A daily plan will help you work more efficiently. Only you know your productive rhythms. Whether you're a morning person or late starter, organise your day so that the tougher tasks are completed when you're at your optimum best. Setting little targets throughout the day will also give you a sense that you're achieving things and progress is being made.

SET THE SCENE

The environment you create for yourself will determine how successful you are when doing your job based at home. Standard working from home tips reinforce the importance of enjoying peace and quiet while you're working, being comfortable, as well as the role of communication in setting the scene for your remote working life moving forward.


- **Work in the same place**: How easy this is will depend on your circumstances. Finding a room at home where you can sit comfortably with minimal distraction is a bare minimum requirement. If you live alone, great; if you share, negotiate a solution. And if you have children, we've provided some advice **here about working from home with kids**. Ideally, the space should be separate from those you use for leisure.

- **Manage expectations**: If you're working at home with your wife, partner, housemate(s) or pets you need to quickly establish ground rules. Consider using a 'do not disturb' sign on your workspace door during those 'hyper-productive' periods.' Ask that noise levels remain conducive to work. Agree who will answer the telephone or the door during certain times of the day. For those working from home with kids, see our **tips for scheduling childcare** here.

- **Help yourself focus**: There are **several tools now available** to help you tune out of social media sites, personal emails, etc. Now's the time to download and use them. Put your personal laptop and phone in another room away from your workstation. Consider logging out of all your (news, email, social media) accounts too. And another useful suggestion is to prepare meals in advance and have snacks by your desk, so your trips to the kitchen are short and infrequent.

ENJOY YOUR FREEDOM

A natural response to working from home is to behave as if you're doing a penance – and working harder than you normally would, for longer hours too. Instead of wallowing in your invented pit of self-flagellation, approach working from home as an opportunity to treasure. It's a chance to shake off the shackles of office life and tap into some latent creativity.
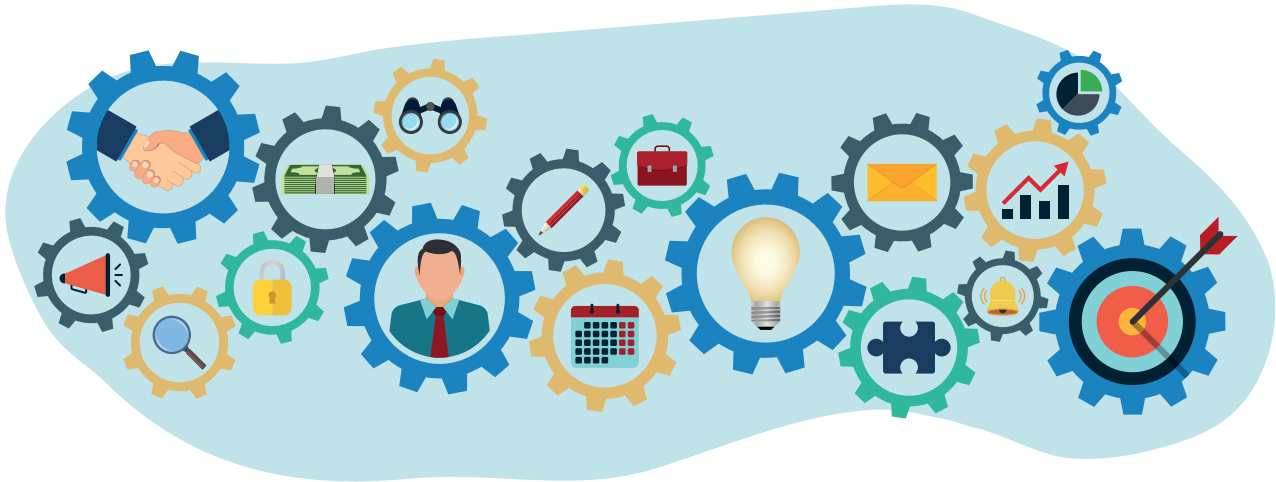
- **Get creative**: Your home offers a different vibe than the office, and that can be disconcerting at first. But don't be afraid of the silence – embrace it. Set alarms if you have to and channel your energies in creative bursts throughout the day. Monty Python's John Cleese offers some great advice **on 'creating the conditions for creativity'**. It takes self-motivation, though, to enter your 'open mode.' That's why it's important to remain positive and eager to impress.

- **Treat yourself**: Avoiding distractions at home is difficult. So rather than blocking them out completely, why not factor them into your day. Develop a reward scheme that allows you to enjoy at 'at home' activity once a certain task is completed. Be sensible, though. This doesn't mean you can switch off and play video games for two hours. But, within reason, take some shorter breaks and focus on one distraction throughout the day.

- **Stay connected**: A great way to stay positive is to stay connected. It's easy to slip into the life of a hermit when working from home for long periods. Don't be a stranger. Pick up the phone, use Facetime or investigate **video conferencing tools** and make sure to check in often with colleagues and friends. Over-communicating is a **good idea for remote teams**. And when it comes to maintaining friendships, there's extra time during the day to do this now you're not commuting. Make the most of it.

How to achieve a work-life balance
with young children at home

It could be your worst nightmare or a welcome change to the mundanity of office life. Whatever your thoughts, working at home with kids is a reality for many people amid the outbreak of COVID-19. Below, we review the best strategies for maintaining productivity – and your sanity – while working at home with kids.

COMMUNICATION, EXPECTATIONS, GUIDELINES

As with any big change at home or work, you need to communicate clearly what is happening and why, straightaway.

- Create some basic ground rules and manage the expectations of your children, as well as your partner or spouse if required.
- Everyone's needs must be accounted for in this new arrangement, and that means doing some planning and scheduling to ensure adapting to the change is as smooth as possible.
- A key part of this is accepting that the daily targets and challenges you set yourself may have to go-by-the-wayside, as you adjust to your new circumstances.
- Don't beat yourself up about it, though. Learn to prioritise. And accept that working from home with kids means sometimes not achieving all you want to in a typical working day.

STRUCTURE WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF FLEXIBILITY

Structuring your working day is important when working from home with kids. But, you must accept that this won't mirror a traditional 9-5 routine.

- A good way to decide when you will work is to try and do it while your child is sleeping. This could mean getting up a couple of hours earlier, staying up later, or working during your child's afternoon nap.
- Factor in your partners schedule too, as well as any planned work meetings – this may involve some tweaking at the start of each day. You could even create a childcare rotation system with your spouse – two hours on, two hours off.

Whatever you decide, don't put unnecessary pressure on yourself. Things may change on the fly. When they do, accept it – and embrace your new agile working life.

WHERE YOU WORK IS IMPORTANT TOO

Home working advice emphasises the importance of establishing a dedicated space where you will work each day. When you're working from home with kids, however, deciding where this will be is problematic. There are two main solutions, and which one you choose will depend on your circumstances.

- The first is to find a room in the house and create boundaries for when your children can enter. This is only feasible if someone else in the house is trusted with their care – your partner or an older child perhaps.
- Another option is to set-up your workstation in view of your kids. Great for keeping an eye on them, yes, but not so good for concentration.

Investing in noise-cancelling earplugs or headphones – or even a fan or white noise machine – is a wise idea.

RELAX THE RULES AND DON'T RESTRICT PLAY

The TV can be your saving grace when working at home with kids. You won't find many better opportunities to get work done than when they're sat watching a movie for a couple of hours.

- In the past, you may have restricted their screen time, but now your circumstances have changed, it might be time to reassess the rules and extend their privileges vis-a-vis your needs.

- Discipline is important but given the heightened intensity of working near your kids, you should establish a playful and positive environment. Let them get all that energy out of their system – whether that's through running about the house or playing with toys – embrace the chaos for a while and reap the rewards later.

- Independent play is important for toddler development too. And rotating toys can help keep their attention for longer, so playtime occurs in focused periods.

NEVER FEEL GUILTY ABOUT JOINING IN

It'll be frustrating at first. But switching to the 'working at home with kids' mind-set as soon as possible will improve your mental health and productivity. Remember all those times you missed out on key moments in your child's development because of work? Now, you're around them all the time, and that's an opportunity to treasure.

So, join in with their play and give them your undivided attention if you have to, because those memories will be precious down the line.

Being 'fully present' in whatever you're doing is also good for your mind and motivation.

When taking time out with your child, do it properly – turn off the computer and leave your phone on the desk. You and your child benefit from uninterrupted emotional and physical connection.

AND FINALLY… REMEMBER TO INTERACT WITH GROWN-UPS

Hopefully, there'll be plenty of opportunities for you to chat to colleagues throughout the day. That's important for maintaining a connection to your professional life. Ideally, these should be video conferences where the personal connection is augmented through visual contact.

You should also maintain regular communication with other adults – family, friends, etc – so you can enjoy being yourself without the work/parent hat on. Spending all your time with your child and/or spouse will negatively impact your wellbeing.

- Find time to meet up with friends, if possible (depending on your Government's policy for limiting the spread of COVID-19).

- Or again, leverage technology to ensure these interactions are intimate and meaningful.

- Use your 'me time' productively too. Take up a hobby, do exercise, read a book or enjoy a film. Anything to engage the brain and give you a sense of purpose outside of the restrictive work/parent parameters.

Conclusion:
Top priorities moving forward

LEADERS

As we stressed in the introduction, leaders must act quickly to create the right environment for remote work to take place. That means embedding remote work 'thinking' into hiring and leadership strategies.

- **Communication** is at the heart of this. We suggest you start by establishing an action plan for communicating with remote employees, laying the ground rules and ensuring your people acknowledge these vis-à-vis their situation.
- **Technology** will underpin your success. Act now to guarantee all necessary tools and systems are in place. Liaise with your IT department and consider solutions for different scenarios.
- **Development** is often neglected in remote working scenarios. But just because your people aren't in the office doesn't mean you don't need a proper career plan and opportunities to learn new skills. Factor this into your remote hiring plan too.

EMPLOYEES

Whether this is a new scenario for you, or you're a veteran to remote work, now's the time to tap into your self-motivation and use your initiative. We all have these qualities, and you're going to need them while working at home.

- **Scheduling** your time is the most important thing to get right. Establish a routine that works, set your hours and find ways to balance your personal and professional life as quickly as possible.
- **Learning** as much as you can about the different processes and technologies is key. Leveraging these will help you connect with peers and make your remote working experience fun and hassle-free.
- **Visibility** is good for morale but essential for business continuity too. Your colleagues need to know when and what you're working on. And it's up to you to provide timely updates, so everyone is kept in the loop when you're not 'physically' around.

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