WORKING FROM HOME: HOW TO GET REMOTE WORK RIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

For many, their workplace has gone from open-floor plan offices and conference rooms to kitchen tables and video calls. In this special feature, ZDNet and TechRepublic help enterprises and SMBs alike navigate the technical and management challenges of a remote workforce.

REMOTE WORK: 5 THINGS EVERY BUSINESS NEEDS TO KNOW

If your company plans to allow employees to continue working from home, there are five key things you should know in order to make this transition seamless and efficient.

BY: JACK WALLEN/TECHREPUBLIC CONTRIBUTOR

Once upon a time, remote work was something only tech startups considered to be an option for staff members scattered across the globe. Then a pandemic struck, forcing businesses everywhere to reconsider the possibility that allowing employees to work from home might be the only way to keep the company from failing.

According to a TechRepublic survey, 61% of businesses have gone out of their way to make remote work possible for most employees. That's not a blip on the radar. Given that an overwhelming majority of respondents (61%) would rather work from home than in an office, it's safe to say the remote work option is here to stay.

IMAGE: ISTOCK/DRAZEN ZIGIC

For employees, it's a change in routine and locale, but for businesses, it's much more than that--every company has far more to consider. Let's dive into five considerations that your company must understand for a smooth and productive work from home experience.

REMOTE OFFICE TOOLS

No matter where your employees work, they need the right tools. When those employees are working in the office, you provide them with everything necessary to get the job done: Computers, printers, mobile devices, desks, chairs, network devices, software, white boards, and more. If you believe employees working from home should be on their own for equipment, you're doing remote work wrong. If you're not willing to directly pay for the tools your employees need, you should at least consider allowing them to expense those costs. All purchases must be approved; otherwise, you'll wind up with employees buying extravagant chairs and laptops.

According to our survey, 56% of respondents said that their company had done a poor job of supplying the necessary hardware (computers, printers, etc.) and 52% of respondents said their company had done a poor job supplying them with the necessary office equipment (desks, chairs, etc.) to work remotely. Unless this improves, you'll wind up with staff who are either incapable of doing their jobs with any level of productivity (at best) or burn out and quit (at worst).

- At a bare minimum, your company should supply remote workers with:
- A computer or laptop for work only
- A printer (if needed)
- All software necessary to do their jobs
- A VPN (if security is a concern)

MANAGING BURNOUT

Burnout is a serious issue with employees who are not accustomed to working from home. Why does this happen? The biggest reason is the inability to separate work from home. When this happens, the lines blur so much that employees can begin to feel as though they're working 24/7/365. On top of that, people no longer get that much-needed break from family life. That one-two punch makes burnout happen faster and on a more profound level.

How do you manage this? The most important thing you can do is keep the lines of communication open. You'll need to have someone (or multiple people) on hand to talk to staff in order to help them through these periods.

- You'll need to educate your staff to:
- Create a routine such as scheduled work times that clearly define "work time" and "home time."
- Set boundaries like, "When the office door is closed, I'm at work."

- Communicate with family--make sure your employees are doing a good job of communicating with their loved ones.
- Practice self-care. Your employees will need, on some level, to learn how to take care of themselves to avoid stress.
- Understand priorities so your staff always knows what work takes priority and what work can be put off.

According to our survey, 78% of respondents indicated they were working from home five days a week. If those staff members don't work smart, they'll suffer burnout fast. Feeling like they're "in the office" day in and day out can be exhausting.To that end, you'll need to consider allowing staff to work a flexible schedule.

MANAGING A FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE

This one is a challenge for most businesses because nearly every company works on the assumption that business hours are universal. There's a reason why Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" resonates so well with a majority of the population around the world.

However, with remote workers, the idea of a set work schedule needs to be thrown out the door. You must remember that people are working at home, which can throw a major wrench in the works. What am I talking about?

- Tending to children who aren't in school
- The possibility of burnout
- Family responsibilities
- Less reliable networks
- Equipment failure

The single most important thing to consider is that your employees do prefer to work from home and can be even more productive working in that comfortable environment. That improved productivity might come with a price for your company in the form of allowing for flexible schedules.

Remember: As long as work is getting done in a timely fashion, it shouldn't matter when it's getting done.

SECURITY IS KEY

One thing your business must consider is security, and how to help your remote workers do their jobs without compromising company data. This might mean you'll need to purchase enterprise-class VPN services for those who must transmit sensitive data from their home networks. Those employees who deal with very sensitive data might also need to be trained on how to make use of encryption.

Another issue that must be addressed is passwords. When your remote staff is in the office, you probably have password policies in place. On their home networks, you cannot enforce those policies, which means you'll need to train your remote workers to change all network passwords (such as those for wireless routers) to be strong and unique. Even if you also have to get those employees up to speed on using a password manager (which they should anyway), this cannot be stressed enough.

KPIS TO MONITOR

You need to know which Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to monitor, and I suggest these KPIs as a good starting point.

- **Self-discipline:** An employee's ability to work independently.

- Effective communication: An employee's ability to communicate effectively and efficiently with teams and clients.

- **Learning skills:** An employee's ability to not just follow a known instruction set, but to learn new things with efficiency.

- **Remote vs. local tasks:** Are there tasks that can or cannot be performed remotely? You must know the difference.

- **Accountability:** Employees must learn to hold themselves accountable to get their tasks done with less supervision.

- **Self-discipline:** Employees must be capable of staying on task with less supervision.

- **Collaboration:** Employees must be capable of working with other teammates efficiently via video/audio chat and email.

- **Availability:** Managers must be available to discuss work-related matters during business hours. Although employees might work a flexible schedule, they also must be available during business hours.

CONCLUSION

Your company's transition from a standard work environment to a full remote or hybrid (remote and in-house) environment doesn't have to be a challenge. Given nearly every business across the globe has been practically forced into this new world order, the hard part is already taken care of. With just a bit of extra planning and work, you can make this new reality not only seamless but even more productive.

RESEARCH: HOW BUSINESSES GET WORKING REMOTELY RIGHT

Ninety-six percent of respondents said their company either very successfully or successfully executed its remote work approach, according to a recent TechRepublic Premium poll.

BY: MELANIE WOLKOFF WACHSMAN/TECHREPUBLIC

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, working remotely has become the new normal for many professionals. The workplace has shifted from open floor plans to kitchen tables; video calls have replaced meetings in conference rooms; and wearing sweats has become the business casual uniform of choice.

How well are businesses executing their remote work approach? That was what ZDNet's sister site, TechRepublic Premium, wanted to find out.

TechRepublic Premium conducted a survey to learn more about how organizations are managing their

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO/TUIPHOTOENGINEER

remote workforces. The survey, which was conducted online from January and February 2021, recorded 857 respondents' views on what their company has executed well or poorly as part of its remote work approach. They also answered questions about remote work policies, platforms they depend on the most, and what connectivity changes they incorporated to make working from home possible.

As a result of COVID-19, a majority (61%) of businesses have gone out of their way to make remote work possible for most employees. According to respondents, 78% indicated that they are working from home five days a week. Five percent work remotely for four or three days a week, 4% work remotely two days a week, and 2% of respondents work remotely one day a week.

Not all respondents work remotely. Of the survey respondents, 6% said they do not work remotely; however, of those respondents, 61% would work remotely, if given the opportunity.

The majority (96%) of respondents said their company either very successfully or successfully executed its remote work approach. Some of the top ways employers make it easier for employees to work remotely are by

providing conferencing tools (81%), computer hardware (74%) and connectivity tools such as VPN or cellular devices (73%).

This is a good thing since 80% of respondents reported depending on video conferencing platforms (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams) for remote work. Cloud-based office suites for collaboration (such as Google Workspace or Office 365) are necessary for 63% of respondents to work remotely, and for 57%, VPN is essential. Cloud storage followed as a necessity for 46% of respondents, and then respondents listed team tools (such as Slack) at 33%. Fewer respondents required project management tools (13%), private cloud solutions (7%) and team management tools (5%).

Where employers fell short, according to respondents, is supplying hardware (56%) and providing equipment to help employees create an effective remote workspace (52%). In addition, 37% of respondents reported that their company has done a poor job with their remote work approach with video conferencing tools, virtual collaboration tools, manager training and HR resources.

Interestingly, 75% of respondents reported not needing to change their connectivity to make working from home possible. However, 7% of respondents have added a mesh network or purchased a Wi-FI hotspot to use as a backup, and 5% either switched providers or replaced consumer-grade network hardware with something more secure.

The infographic on the next page contains selected details from the research. To read more findings and analysis, download the full report: Research: How to successfully navigate the technical and management challenges of a remote workforce (free for TechRepublic Premium subscribers).
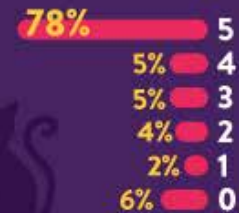
Working From Home: How to Get Remote Work Right

96%
of respondents said their company's remote work approach has been **very successful** or **successful**.

How many days a week do you currently work remotely?

- 78% — 5
- 5% — 4
- 5% — 3
- 4% — 2
- 2% — 1
- 6% — 0

What has your company done well as part of its remote work approach?*

Done well		Done poorly
74%	Computer hardware	56%
73%	Connectivity tools	33%
59%	Employee communication	n/a
27%	HR resources	37%
62%	IT support resources	33%
15%	Manager training/tools	37%
7%	Physical office changes	19%
42%	Providing equipment for an effective workspace	52%
87%	Video conferencing tools	37%
55%	Virtual collaboration tools (excluding video conferencing)	37%
4%	Other	26%

What has your company done poorly as part of its remote work approach?*

What types of platforms have you depended on most for remote work?*

- 80% Video conferencing
- 63% Cloud-based office suite for collaboration
- 57% VPN
- 46% Cloud storage
- 33% Team communication
- Project management 13%
- Other 10%
- Private cloud solutions 7%
- Team management 5%

*Respondents could select more than one answer.

TechRepublic. ZDNet

CIO JURY: REMOTE WORK WILL REMAIN AN OPTION FOR 100% OF EMPLOYEES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Working from anywhere is a trend that will remain in place in years to come.

BY: TEENA MADDOX/TECHREPUBLIC

Remote work and work-from-anywhere will continue to be part of the perks offered to employees long after the COVID-19 pandemic is over, at least according to TechRepublic's CIO Jury.

And they're not alone. Gartner has said that global spending on IT relating to remote work will hit $332.9 billion this year as businesses resume IT expansion plans, which were delayed as a result of the pandemic. Remote work is a reality, and there is an increased demand for technology with ongoing protocols in place as a result of COVID-19, according to a TechRepublic article by Owen Hughes.

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

TechRepublic polled members of its CIO Jury to find out how they're handling remote work within their own organizations. Jury members were asked this question, "Will you offer a remote work option for at least some of your employees after the pandemic?" All 12 jury members said yes.

Christine Schoeff, senior vice president of HR at FourKites, said that her company will allow employees to continue to work remotely at least through 2021.

"We anticipate a hybrid model in the future with a combination of office presence and remote workers, which will also allow us to capitalize on broader talent markets," Schoeff said. "Our entire global workforce went remote back in mid-March. What we found was that we lost no productivity, and in many cases, our productivity as a team increased as we rushed to answer urgent requests from customers in need of support during those early COVID-19 months."

FourKites is putting its employees mental and physical health at the top of the company's priority list. The organization now has a global remote guide for employees that gives them explicit permission to decline

meeting invites and encourages them to set their own boundaries and take time for themselves each day. There's a bi-weekly Culture of Connection Committee for employees to use as a brainstorming session to come up with ideas on how to better connect while remote, and there are new coaching opportunities for employees and support for managers.

At Qumu, TJ Kennedy, president and CEO, said the company has gone entirely remote and is calling it "Work from Wherever, Forever," and has closed almost all of its offices including its headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and in the U.K. and in India.

"We're allowing our 140 employees to work from wherever, even after the pandemic is over," Kennedy said. "For us, this means we can take advantage of the flexibility, productivity and effectiveness that our team has already experienced working remotely during the pandemic."

The company surveyed employees last year and found out what they wanted and what was working best. "We wanted to make sure we had the right capabilities, the right technologies, and the right infrastructure. What we learned is that remote work has turned out to be better for our employees and our company. It's a great way for them to have work-life balance and flexibility and also drive the most productive company going forward," Kennedy said.

Qumu has implemented a new SaaS human resources tool that allows for feedback on a daily basis, and dashboards and other information-sharing elements are being considered, he said.

At TELUS International, nearly 100% of employees have been working remotely for a year and the company has developed and launched new cloud-enabled technological innovations to power all aspects of remote work, said Mike Ringman, CIO of TELUS.

"But as we move forward, closely monitoring the impacts and outcomes of the evolving pandemic, and in ongoing consultation with our clients, we anticipate further developing a digital-native, dynamic global team that is agile, scalable, backed by the right infrastructure and equipped with next-gen tools to be capable of working from wherever the work needs to be done. We know that ensuring our IT infrastructure is cloud-enabled will continue to be vital to ensure we remain flexible enough to successfully take on any future iterations of working models," Ringman said.

There are challenges to consider in fostering a culture of collaboration, he continued. "It can be challenging to foster engagement for remote employees on a sustained basis, but we know that authentic leadership in combination with advanced communication channels and collaboration tools, such as internal social media apps, videoconferencing, chat and Google Drive can make all the difference."

At Olive, CEO Sean Lane said, "In May of 2020 we introduced a flexible workforce model called The Grid. We knew that traditional workplace requirements were no longer needed and wanted to empower our employees to work wherever they are most effective. So that's why we introduced The Grid, a work model where we don't all have to be physically together to be a highly successful company. Since implementing The Grid, we've increased our monthly hires by 300% and grown from approximately 200 employees to over 600.

"We've also become much more distributed, with 77% of our new hires work not local to our headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. We now have employees in 40+ states and five 'sub-stations' (smaller hub offices in locations with 10+ employees) in addition to our HQ. Looking to the future, our Grid model is here to stay. We will never require employees to 'go back.' For us, monolithic offices are dead, and we will innovate our model to ensure we have the best talent to power Olive going forward."

It's important for companies to recognize the importance of offering a remote work choice to employees now and in the future.

Kirk Yamamoto, advisory board member, BWG Strategy LLC, said, "Honestly, if this hiring option isn't available, you will lose the opportunity to hire qualified candidates who really require remote work in order to maintain their work/life balance. Look at the larger tech companies in northern California who've already fully embraced WFH. They're smart enough to understand to be competitive in this job market, you have to offer the option."

Here are this month's CIO Jury participants:

- *Sam Soheil Farajian, chief information and digital officer, Toastmasters International*
- *Mike Ferris, global IT director of infrastructure, Lincoln Electric*
- *Christine Schoeff, senior vice president of HR, FourKites*
- *Kirk Yamamoto, advisory board member, BWG Strategy LLC*
- *TJ Kennedy, president and CEO, Qumu*
- *Sean Lane, CEO, Olive*
- *Dan Gallivan, director of information technology, Payette*
- *John Gracyalny, vice president of digital member services, Coast Central Credit Union*
- *Randy Krzyston, senior manager, IT security and compliance, Brinks Home Security*
- *Kris Seeburn, independent IT consultant, evangelist, and researcher*
- *Mike Ringman, CIO, TELUS*
- *Michael Litt, CEO, Vidyard*

SETTING GOALS FOR REMOTE WORKERS IS HARD. HERE'S WHAT MANAGERS NEED TO KNOW

With remote working set to become the norm for many, team leaders need to figure out how to manage remote workers and set goals and KPIs in a new world.

BY: OWEN HUGHES/TECHREPUBLIC

Now that a significant proportion of the professional workforce is working from home, managers are faced with big questions. How can they manage, motivate and support staff working remotely – not just within the context of COVID-19, but in a future dominated by remote-first teams?

Carol Cochran, VP of people and culture at jobs platform FlexJobs, says managing flexible workers needn't be significantly more difficult than managing in-office workers. "While it does take a shift in managerial practices, the management practices that

IMAGE: DRAZEN ZIGIC/ ISTOCK

work well for flexible workers work well for all workers, so it's a benefit for the entire team whether people work," she tells ZDNet.

"Start by discussing and setting agreed-upon goals with your remote employees. Measuring remote employee productivity involves thinking about issues such as quality of work, quantity of tasks completed, and ability to finish tasks in a timely manner."

Once these expectations are agreed upon between manager and employee, they should be converted into SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based) targets.

From here, managers should set clear expectations and practice proactive communication on what it means to be a remote worker at the organization, says Cochran: "As a leader, ensure you're frequently connecting with each person on your team to talk about their specific contributions and to acknowledge their unique experiences."

According to Blakeley Hartfelder, research director at analyst Gartner HR, managers may be reluctant to give up the level of visibility into employees' activities they were used to having in the office in the 'new normal' of remote working.

A Gartner poll of HR leaders last year found that the percentage of organizations tracking the productivity of remote workers rose from 49% in April 2020 to 73% in August. Of these, 33% of organizations are passively tracking remote employee productivity through technology, Gartner found.

Before embracing employee monitoring technologies, managers should consider whether the benefits are worth the risks of causing employees stress, damaging employee-manager relationships and enabling a culture of mistrust and suspicion in the digital workplace, says Hartfelder.

"Most employees who work remotely enjoy it, primarily because of the flexibility it gives them in terms of when and where they work. By taking away employees' sense of flexibility and self-direction, overzealous monitoring may cancel out the benefits to their engagement and productivity," she tells ZDNet.

"Managers should be able to trust employees to do their work without persistent monitoring. Constant surveillance might motivate employees to make sure they look busy all the time, but it is unlikely to bring out their best work."

If managers feel the need to micromanage the activity of their remote teams, this could be a sign that the employer-employee relationship is already damaged.

Cochran says issues in setting and measuring KPIs for remote workers often arise when there's a lack of communication between employer and employee.

"It's easy for leaders new to remote management to mistake activity for productivity. Logging in does not necessarily equate to work being accomplished," Cochran tells ZDNet.

"Conversely, an employee who happens to step away from their desk when you message them through a tool like Slack, may have exceeded their goals for the day, despite a momentary absence."

Logging employees' activities on a granular scale can be a poor tool for measuring performance, Hartfelder explains.

"Take for example an employee whose productivity is recorded automatically based on keystrokes and app usage on their work computer. The system might encourage behaviors like staying at a desk all day afraid to take breaks or doing busywork to avoid looking idle," she says.

A better approach to managing remote workers is to set clear goals with well-defined timelines and deadlines, and to measure performance by whether employees meet their goals effectively.

How their work impacts the business should also be taken into consideration, says Hartfelder. This outcome-based approach gives employees the flexibility to manage their time in whatever way works best for them.

Of course, goals tend to be based on prior targets and results. For some employees, goals may no longer be relevant if the move to remote working has changed businesses' priorities, or otherwise made certain ongoing projects unworkable.

Managers should be aware of situations that might result in employees having to adjust or reassess targets. This can include personal triggers – such as changes in an employee's personal life that may impact work – as well as changes in their work environment or wider company strategy.

"[Managers] should also be having proactive conversations with employees about business strategy and how that strategy connects to employees' work and progress against goals. In a remote environment, it's even more important these conversations start with empathy," says Hartfelder.

Regular check-ins shouldn't be solely for the purpose of ensuring workers are hitting deadlines.

Many employees are still struggling with remote work, particularly those who have additional duties at home, non-ideal home-working arrangements, or anxiety about the pandemic.

This can have a knock-on effect on workplace performance, notes Chris Mullen, executive director of The Workforce Institute at tech company UGK.

"If staff are failing to meet their targets while working remotely, the first logical question for managers to ask themselves is why?" he tells ZDNet.

"Do not just go in all-guns blazing and assume the employee is underperforming. Take a step back to consider the ongoing disruption to each and every person. While many employees' actual working style might not have changed, other parts of their lives have been transformed and it is important for managers to recognize and respond to this."

Perhaps the most obvious change for business leaders in recent months has been a greater focus on empathy and employee wellbeing, says Mullen.

As part of this, managers have had to take on coaching roles and openly discuss workloads, interests, mental health, aspirations, and other factors outside of their current role to form a closer connection with employees.

"Maintaining personal connections and introducing stress management and self-care practices have also become critical steps in helping employees maintain a healthy work-life balance," he adds.

"While employee wellbeing has always been important, ensuring staff are happy, healthy, and motivated has become a day-to-day imperative for business leaders in the new world of work."

A report from Ricoh in February highlighted how employees are affected by the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers. In an office environment, employees were accustomed to receiving validation – so-called 'micro-rewards – for doing good work. This validation provides a confidence boost, which in turn motivates workers and boosts productivity.

Without regular communication and feedback, workers may lose confidence in their ability, killing motivation and leading to a drop in productivity. Managers can help here by recognizing individual team members' efforts and achievements and sharing this recognition with the entire team.

"As a leader, ensure you're frequently connecting with each person on your team to talk about their specific contributions and to acknowledge their unique experiences," says Cochran.

"If you feel a remote employee is slacking off or needs help, consider asking more targeted questions that will address the situation and get to the heart of the productivity decline. When coupled with regularly scheduled check-ins, open-ended questions like 'What do you need help with?' and 'Is there anything getting in the way of meeting that deadline?' will ensure work is being completed and KPIs are staying on track."

Cochran says that affective management ultimately comes down to giving employees the resources they need to do their jobs well and having regularly scheduled team check-ins, scheduled one-on-ones, and access to cross-team training.

She also suggests managers get creative with virtual social activities that can help remote employees to feel included and avoid burnout.

"Whether these initiatives look like a company-wide Zoom team lunch or a virtual water-cooler channel on Slack, it's critical for leaders to establish and promote healthy work-life boundaries," she tells ZDNet.

"It's important to give trust to your remote workers that they will manage their time in a way that produces the best results. If that's not happening, address it immediately. Proactive communication is critical to the success of remote work."

HOW LEADING COMPANIES SHOULD BE HANDLING REMOTE WORK

Siddharth Rao, a staff software engineer and a technical lead in the revenue product organization at Twitter, tells Beth Mauder how companies can be confident in their remote employee hires.

BY: BETH MAUDER/ZDNET

As the world and workforces continue to deal with the struggles that the COVID-19 pandemic has created, new ways for handling the remote landscape have emerged. Now, more than ever, companies are opening up positions to more remote employees, job interviews are being held online instead of in person, and managers are working to recreate how new employees mingle and build meaningful relationships with their coworkers. *ZDNet* caught up with Siddharth Rao, a staff software engineer and a technical lead in the revenue product organization at Twitter, to learn about how leading companies are navigating the new normal.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Watch my conversation with Rao above, or read a few of the highlights below.

Beth Mauder: What kind of challenges are engineering teams facing by hiring remotely?

Siddharth Rao: I think as the world has gone remote, most companies are just trying to figure out how to capitalize and solve the challenges of the remote environment. And the way I like to think about that is dividing the problem within the life cycle of a software engineer's tenure at a company. So you can think of it as a problem that's divided for interviewing, onboarding, mentoring, and even off-boarding.

So if you ask about how this has changed, especially interviewing, one of the biggest challenges is companies are seeing five times, six times more resumes for every position that they're putting out for. Because everyone's realizing as soon as you turn that filter off, you have to be located in city X, the amount of people applying for jobs is tremendously high. Then moving on, if you think about just interviewing, every company is trying to figure out what is the best process to interview someone and only look at the metrics that really do measure

someone's performance at a company. And winning companies will be able to filter out the noise in a remote-first interview. Understanding what are the limitations that an interviewee has, and filtering all of that noise out just to get the signals of someone's future performance at a company.

Beth Mauder: What is the winning solution is to find the best employees now that we have this massive amount of talent searching for jobs, regardless of location?

Siddharth Rao: So if you look back at pre-remote work, generally what companies would try to do is they would have a technical screening round, a hiring managers screen, and then they will try to bring the employee to the company, to their premise. Now, given everything is remote, the part that has changed is you never get to meet the person. So understanding deeply about what are some signals that you were previously collecting that you're not able to collect? And what are those signals that are actually just noise?

So for example, if you're interviewing someone and there are technical difficulties and perhaps there's a culture barrier, maybe there's a noise barrier. So understanding all of these and being inclusive of everyone's differences, the situations they're currently in, and understanding what are the key things in someone's interview process that are just a result of where they are and what technologies they have access to and filtering all of those things out and only focusing on here's the problem that we asked them. And here's how they answered, are the winning strategies by far.

Beth Mauder: What does training look like in this remote world? How how do you implement that digitally?

Siddharth Rao: One of the major problems in a remote-first world is making the employee feel connected to the environment. And spending time and having them acclimated into the company culture. And one of the most common reasons for that to not happen is employees often feel discouraged or disconnected to the team and they end up essentially leaving. So some things that I believe leaders in these companies could do is really invest the time. So for example, if a new employee is joining on day one, the team and the managers should just clear their whole calendars. And essentially what we have seen work is, you sit in a virtual room where the new employee just asks questions. Because day one is the day where you have questions as a new employee, every five minutes, 10 minutes, "Oh, I don't have access to this tool. I am unable to access my email." And having that support network of there's this whole team sitting in this virtual room where I could just go and quickly ask this question, really helps that experience.

Second, is generally a company is a place where people come to form a lot of professional relationships. And as managers and leaders in the company, it's more of a pronounced role at this point to ensure that your new employees are able to be exposed to that environment where they're able to create these relationships. So acting as a catalyst, into enabling someone, to meet other folks at the company, introducing them to folks who are

working in similar problem spaces, ensuring that there's enough face-to-face video time of the new employee with the team.

Beth Mauder: How do companies correctly and accurately monitor productivity and performance remotely?

Siddharth Rao: So I think it's two aspects. One of them is pure, like from a mentorship perspective. I think almost every leading company in Silicon Valley has some kind of mentorship program. I think what everyone is trying to figure out is how do you run this effectively and at scale in a remote-first world? The challenge is to be able to tailor your mentorship program and help your employees exceed in their areas of expertise by tailoring your mentorship program. What I mean by that is understanding what your employee exactly needs and how often. Some folks, like more video time, some folks just like getting feedback over email, some folks like feedback often.

So understanding these very human aspects of someone and tailoring your mentorship and your feedback experience based on exactly on that. So you would see a huge set of employees, they need feedback consistently week over week over week. Some are a lot more on the shy perspective where they're more likely to respond well to feedback given once a month or 30 days. So I've seen companies who are able to tailor their mentorship experience based on this new world are a lot more successful in being able to course-correct the trajectory of an employee to ensure it's always positive. Second thing is having some structure and being able to measure the performance of an employee. So having 15-day check-ins, 30-day, 60-, 90-day check-ins.

And enabling the employee to set goals for themselves. So setting expectations often and setting expectations early is one of the key things that you could do in a remote-first world. Any feedback that is a surprise to an employee is a failure on the manager. Employees should never be surprised by any feedback. And in a remote-first world, it's often easy to forget or not give feedback often, because when you're in a social setting, it's often you see someone and you're like, "Oh, let me remind them of that email they weren't able to send last week." However, in a remote-first world, you have to be extremely explicit about having that conversation.

FAKE COLLABORATION APPS ARE STEALING DATA AS STAFF STRUGGLE WITH HOME-WORKING SECURITY

Cyber criminals know that working from home can provide them with an easier way into corporate networks - resulting in a rise in attacks targeting remote devices.

BY: DANNY PALMER/ZDNET

There's been a significant rise in organisations encountering malware attacks on remote devices over the course of the past year as employees have been forced to work from home.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has resulted in more remote working than ever before and both organisations and employees have had to quickly adapt to this new environment and the additional challenges that come with it.

One of those challenges is cyber criminals attempting to take advantage of remote workers' insecure PCs as an entry point into corporate networks.

IMAGE: UBERIMAGES, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

As a result of this, there's been a rise in malware attacks targeting remote workers and, according to cyber-security company Wandera's Cloud Security Report 2021, over half of organisations – 52% – experienced a malware incident on a remote device. That's up from just 37% of organisations experiencing malware attacks on remote devices during 2019.

In many instances, cyber criminals are taking advantage of known vulnerabilities in software to help deliver malware under the radar, as users struggle with software management and patch installation without the direct aid of a corporate IT team.

Remote workers are tricked into downloading malicious applications from phishing emails that install malware, but they believe they're installing something that will help their productivity.

"More often than not, the offending apps were being downloaded and installed by the remote workers themselves," Michael Covington, VP at Wandera told ZDNet.

"We saw a fairly large number of apps claiming to offer collaboration functionality, though in reality they were designed to steal private information like messaging content or trick the user into granting access to the camera and microphone, thus enabling a remote attacker to eavesdrop".

Worryingly, of those devices compromised by malware, over a third of users continued to access corporate emails while one in ten continued to access cloud services – both potentially providing hackers with much wider access to the network than they'd initially gained by compromising one remote machine.

Securing remote employees is proving to be a challenge for information security teams, who themselves are are now also working remotely, making the job even more difficult.

However, engaging with remote employees to provide advice on how to work safely and securely can go a long way to keeping them – and the wider organisation – safe from cyberattacks, something that will be better for everyone in the long run.

"Continuously engaging with workers on the sign-in mechanisms they should use, the incident reporting they should follow, and the applications that are approved for work will help everyone do their part to protect the business and its assets," said Covington.

WORKING FROM HOME DILEMMA: HOW TO MANAGE YOUR TEAM, WITHOUT THE MICRO-MANAGEMENT

Checking in, not checking up: How the good managers can keep teams on track wherever they are.

BY: MARK SAMUELS/ZDNET

Leadership styles have had to change radically this year. Instead of managing colleagues face-to-face, business leaders have had to lead from afar, supervising disparate teams over Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

It's not a leadership style that many managers would have picked; socially-distanced working has been a necessity rather than a choice. And many leaders are still uncomfortable both managing at a distance and trusting their staff to get on with their work without direction.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Harvard Business Review (HBR) reports that 40% of managers have low self-confidence in their ability to manage workers remotely. More than a third (38%), meanwhile, still believe remote workers usually perform worse than those in an office.

Yet as uncomfortable as some managers might be with socially-distanced leadership, it's also true that some of the radical changes associated to this transformation are here to stay, quite possibly in the long term.

When the morning commute does return, don't expect train carriages to be full. Many workers have enjoyed the flexibility that working from home brings. They've seen the benefits and they're going to choose to work for a company that offers some degree of flexibility.

In short, there's going to be no rush to return to the office as we knew it. But executives must be careful to ensure that socially-distant management doesn't turn into a detached leadership style.

On top of this, too many workers are already suffering from burnout. In these challenging conditions, adopting

the right leadership style is going to be crucial, says Randall S. Peterson, professor and academic director of the Leadership Institute at London Business School.

He argues that the core issue for managers is to work out how their workers feel, and that the quality of the interpersonal relationships you create is key.

Employees need to feel connected and trusted. Yet leaders who find it tough to trust their workforce might opt for micro-management; they'll continue to check-up on their workers rather than checking-in to see how they're getting on.

Peterson says leaders should look to develop a management style that cultivates wellbeing. In uncertain times, employees need a sense of certainty from their leaders. Executives should ensure their staff feel engaged, not micro-managed.

"It's more important than ever for managers to ask whether people are getting their ABCs: their autonomy, belonging and competence. Leaders who don't get that from their own boss will tend to overcompensate with the people they're managing; they'll micro-manage, and that's not helpful," he says.

Lily Haake, head of the CIO Practice at recruiter Harvey Nash, agrees that leaders who micro-manage will struggle in the new normal. They won't get the best from the workers and their effectiveness will suffer.

Haake says managers who want to cultivate wellbeing need to pick up on subtle signs that all isn't well. Executives should adopt a considered approach, using a technique like active listening, to pick up on potential issues before they become major problems.

They should marry this ability to pick up on subtext with a renewed focus on the key characteristics that define great leadership, from empowerment through to conviction.

"I think the fundamentals of great leadership are still there," says Haake. "So providing vision, having humility, empowering your team – all of those things remain incredibly important; they were important before, they are now. I guess the difference is that there's so much more trust needed now than ever before."

As the WFH saga extends into 2021, managers will have an even greater duty to ensure that remote working doesn't lead to too much or too little direction. The future of work post-COVID will involve a blend of home working and face-to-face working, which means that the shift from direct interaction to management at-a-distance is going to become more entrenched.

While evidence of Zoom fatigue, low morale and a fall in wellbeing are cause for serious concern, there is another side. Some bosses already report being more in touch with their workforce than before. Daily stand-ups and regular check-ins mean these managers feel that employee engagement is at an all-time high.

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Successful managers will take the lessons learnt from the shift to remote working during 2020 and create a new way of working that relies on trust and fosters employee wellbeing, says Sharm Manwani, executive professor of IT and digital leadership at Henley Business School.

"You can find more ways now of giving employees what they want now," he says. "Managers are coming back and saying, 'Well, how would you like to work in the future?' It's been a great opportunity to actually engage with employees and say, 'You know what, actually, we trust you. We've seen how you work in this environment, we've seen that it actually increases productivity and that is going to change the way we engage with you.'"

No one could have anticipated how quickly businesses would have to transition to remote working; fewer still might have anticipated how successfully this transition would take place. Leaders should think of all the great things that they and their teams have achieved this year.

Steve Bates, principal at consultant KPMG, says there is much to learn from these positive cases. "The deliberateness and the ability to adapt are really important elements and I hope those things stay," he says.

"CIOs are now much more connected to their workforce in many ways than they ever have been. When everyone was working on site, or in their boxes doing their own things, I don't know if the CIO really had to reach out and connect."

What business leaders must do now is to ensure the lessons they've learned during the last few months are used to create an engaged leadership style that is fit for the geographically disparate workplace of the future.

WFH AND BURNOUT: HOW TO BE A BETTER BOSS TO REMOTE WORKERS

Your company might not be in any rush to get its people back into the office, but home workers are suffering from burnout and 'Zoom fatigue'. Executives must think now about how to keep workers engaged as the WFH experiment continues.

BY: MARK SAMUELS/ZDNET

Research suggests as many as 98% of people would like the option to work remotely for the rest of their careers, and many bosses already expect remote working to extend will into 2021 and probably beyond.

"I think the genie is out of the bottle to be honest," says Mark Gannon, director of business change and information solutions at Sheffield City Council. "I think people have realised the benefits of working remotely and the work/life balance that comes with it."

Yet a new-found affection for some of the plus-points of remote working is only one side of the story.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Gannon stresses that the current home-working situation is "far from wonderful". Remote-working strategies were thrown together in days for the most part and, six months into the new normal, these strategies remain a work in progress.

Like other CIOs, Gannon refers to fears over isolation and team cohesion. Analysts suggest that top struggles for remote workers – many of whom are tied to computer screen and video calls – include loneliness, difficulty in unplugging from work, and distractions at home.

Employees refer to virtual-meeting burnout, known as "Zoom fatigue", with more than one-quarter (27%) of employees saying that they are "trying to pay attention, but often zoning out".

One senior executive at a blue-chip business told me recently that her colleagues had simply stopped using video-conferencing technology. "We were sick of seeing each other," she says, adding that most people now simply communicate using instant messaging.

Workers are also tired. Research suggests 75% of workers have experienced burnout, with 40% saying this is a

direct result of the coronavirus pandemic. An additional survey suggests that more than two-thirds (68%) of professionals are feeling more burned out at home than when they did while working in an office, while 60% report working more hours than they were pre-pandemic.

IT professionals have been under more pressure, too. It's been tough work to keep IT running in extreme circumstances.

Joe Soule, CTO at Capital One Europe, has nothing but praise for the way his IT team has pulled together to help keep the business operational and to meet customers' fast-changing demands.

Tech professionals at the bank pivoted at short notice from long-term strategic priorities to more immediate customer-focused concerns, such as ensuring mobile and web channels were stable and resilient. The great news for Soule is that – despite the challenges endured – workplace surveys suggest IT workers at the bank are now more engaged than ever before.

Yet Soule also recognises IT leaders might face longer-term challenges when it comes to keeping employee experience high. "I do worry about people's personal development, and whether they're investing as much in themselves as they are in the organisation right now. Because I have no question that they're investing a lot in the organisation," he says.

That's a sentiment that resonates with many IT managers. CIOs are thankful for the huge efforts their teams expended to keep businesses running and customers happy during lockdown. Now as the pandemic continues, they're going to have to ask their workers to give just a little bit more.

That request is going to be taking place at a time when many IT professionals might have been expecting to return to the office. While people have enjoyed the freedom to WFH, evidence suggests that isolated and burnt-out employees would now relish the opportunity to see colleagues IRL.

The key task for all business leaders now is to re-engage with their staff and to keep workers connected as the WFH experiment stretches onwards. Danny Attias, chief digital and information officer at British charity Anthony Nolan, recognises that connectivity is as much about culture as it is about tech. "CIOs must guide their organisations through the adoption of new ways of working," he says.

In the longer term, Attias is keen – like so many other CIOs and HR directors – to think about how his organisation is going to make better use of existing office space and to create a hybrid approach that mixes the benefits of occasional home working with time in a collaborative workspace.

However, until we can get back to the office, socially distant work is likely to remain the norm. So what about the next few months? As time away from the office and non-face-to-face contact continues, how can CIOs

boost employee experience and keep workers engaged?

For Randall S. Peterson, professor and academic director of the Leadership Institute at London Business School, business leaders must make sure they are present: "The perfect boss is empathetic, understanding, asking questions and open to feedback from their staff on how to manage them differently."

Being present is much easier in a physical space, where bosses can walk down the hallway and read non-verbal clues, such as body posture. Business leaders in our socially distant world must focus on ensuring – regardless of communication channel – that they are doing things that help their workers feel better and more productive.

"Ask questions about people's personal mental health and their sense of belonging," he says. "If you're not already doing it, re-engage the employee in key decisions and get people back involved and re-committed. Provide clear, transparent communication, otherwise your people will drift in different directions."

Peterson says the best way for bosses to avoid the medium- and long-term negative impacts of socially distant work is to avoid disengaging and demotivating people. That approach is all about ensuring employees are "feeling things" and that, as a boss, you're paying attention to employee engagement.

"We're not paying enough attention to people's feelings of belonging to our organisations," he says. "You need to ask people where they are right now, and then understand and meet their needs. Focus on ensuring that people feel that what they do matters to the organisation and the world. If you can get people down that road, you're much more likely to have a better outcome."

FUJITSU TO REDESIGN SINGAPORE OFFICE TO SUPPORT FLEXIBLE WORKING

The company's 500 Singapore-based employees will also have the option to work remotely 90% of the time.

BY: AIMEE CHANTHADAVONG/ZDNET

Fujitsu has announced plans to reconfigure its Singapore office so that employees will have different spaces throughout the office to conduct casual face-to-face meetings, as well as for social interactions.

The company touted shuffling the office space will "empower staff for a more creative and productive experience, focused on communication and people-to-people interaction".

At the same time, the company said it will review and introduce solutions to further improve existing processes such as IT support, collaboration, project

IMAGE: MATTHEW HENRY

approvals, and introduce login methods that would not require a VPN. For instance, a new helpdesk tool will be rolled out to facilitate IT support for staff whether they are working remotely or in the office.

All 500 Singapore-based Fujitsu employees will also be given the option to spend up to 90% of their time working remotely under these new plans, with the company offering an allowance of up to SG$1,000 for all full-time employees to support their work-from-home needs.

Fujitsu said the new plans are part of what the company has dubbed as its "work life shift", a five-year campaign that aims to introduce new flexible working arrangements for staff, and was introduced in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

"An adaptive enterprise is critical to unlocking success, especially in uncertain times. Through Fujitsu's Work Life Shift initiatives in Singapore, we are reimagining working styles through technology and innovation, connecting people, and boosting collaboration," Fujitsu Asia president Motohiko Uno said.

"By incorporating the know-how gleaned from our internal learnings, we are better positioned to pivot from risk, add value and productivity, and enable companies in Singapore and Asia to be more agile and resilient."

Last July, the Japanese conglomerate said it would shut down half of its offices in Japan by the end of the fiscal year 2022 and enable approximately 80,000 Japan-based Fujitsu employees to begin to primarily work remotely, while also expand flexible working hours all Japan-based employees.

The company said it anticipates the changes will improve productivity but also enhance employee work-life balance.

RETURNING TO THE 2021 OFFICE IS ANYTHING BUT NORMAL

Surveillance apps, sanitiser, and space. This is the office environment of 2021.

BY: CHRIS DUCKETT/ZDNET

January 2021 has seen the Sydney outpost of ZDNet Towers open for optional return to workers throughout the year, but after a week of being back in the chair, it's clear office work will not return to what the 2019 versions of us would have thought to be normal.

In no way, shape, or form, does making an office open in 2021 make you a pioneer of the COVID-19 age. Plenty of office spaces in Sydney, and more so in other less coronavirus affected parts of Australia, have been operating since around the middle of 2020

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

-- and if you were a tradesperson, you might have never stopped, even during the height of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, with Australia being able to extinguish or effectively beat down COVID-19 when the virus has reappeared in the community, it does allow a peek of a future that will arrive in your part of the world at some stage.

IT'S STILL VERY QUIET

At the time of writing, New South Wales has recorded five days of no community transmission after a spike in the northern reaches of the city just prior to Christmas. This led to a higher level of mask mandates than the state had put in place previously.

Each day, the state usually has up to a handful or so of positive cases from returned overseas travellers who enter hotel quarantine for two weeks, like everyone else who enters the country. Outbreaks do happen when the virus escapes the hotel quarantine system, but it is under control -- as much as it can be -- without completely pulling up the drawbridge that links Australia to the rest of the world.

After venue alerts included a couple of public transit routes, people are apprehensive about jumping on the train or bus. Let alone the potential for transmission once back in the office itself.

This leads to an observation about the much lower numbers of people in the city compared to the pre-COVID-19 era. This applies to businesses as well; many cafes and food outlets appear to be half-staffed. Streets that would previously be gridlocked are relatively pedestrian-friendly in 2021.

This situation extends to the office itself. Except for a rare few hours on Thursday afternoon, the number of people present did not require a second to count.

Elsewhere in the building, while the official number of people in a lift is restricted to four, I've yet to see more than two enter into an elevator; it seems to be an unspoken rule. There are no extended wait times for lifts, simply because not that many people are around at the moment.

THE OFFICE ITSELF

The office environment of 2021 is a rules-based one. There are some doors you must enter through, and others you must use to exit.

A chequerboard of desks comprised of those that can be used and those that are barred is how the seating plan looks. Desks that can be used are required to be wiped down at the start and end of each day.

Meeting rooms have become merely an expression, with restrictions on the number of people slashed, and many only allowing a single person to use them each time.

One reason to come into the office is to catch up with people in person. But you will not be seated as a team necessarily nor will you work in the old ways. You'll probably still use tools like Slack in the office, simply due to not wanting to shout to someone more than a few desks down.

Upon arrival, everyone is required to check in. The powers that be in ZDNet Towers selected an app that absolutely wants to have full-time GPS access, and complains furiously when it does not. Does it want to provide a floor map of where everyone in the office -- sometimes just me -- has been in case of infection? Maybe, but I never granted it that level of access and let it complain.

Everywhere in the office are the essentials of the COVID-19 world: Hand sanitiser, wipes, masks, and more hand sanitiser.

Prior to last year, it was rare that I would have opinions on sanitiser, but now I definitely do, and the office smell now falls into that familiar category.

For those fleeing insufficient cooling to survive the heights of an Australian summer, the air conditioning makes a pleasant change from my home surrounds. With NSW about to get struck by a heatwave expected

to top 40 degrees celsius next week, this and the need to escape my electricity bill could become the primary reasons to head in.

THE WAY FORWARD

Based on the lack of people that have rushed back into the office, it's fair to say that if those in charge of return-to-the-office plans thought employees were longing to return to how things were, they were wrong.

Working from home is the new preferred normal for this small sample in Sydney. Whether in tiny inner-city apartments, in distant suburbia being hounded by the kids, and everywhere in between, the people simply failed to show up.

Office workers have clearly become accustomed to the new work methods; there is an exceedingly small transmission risk when on transit that plays on your mind, and there is something to be said for using prior commute time to sleep in or take mornings a bit more casually.

Unless you are forced to return to the office during 2021 with zero flexibility, the office is likely to be an adjunct to other factors. If you have an event, team meeting, doctor's appointment, dinner, or need to visit your barber in which case you need to go to the city, it makes no sense to come into the office.

Sometime soon, a bean-counter is going to work out how many squares metres and running costs are being used by a handful of people, and question the economic sense of it all. Then, the great shrinkage of commercial space will arrive in this office as well.

This is all because working from home has become the default, and when given the option, workers appear to be resistant to leaving it behind.

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