

Remote Work in the Time of COVID-19: Key Learnings and Implications



Until recently, remote work was a way of life in a few firms, a hit or miss proposition in others, and a twinkle in the eyes of many more. With COVID-19, all bets were off; suddenly remote work became a way of life for millions of employees not deemed “essential”. Ten months into this enforced “experiment”, CAHRS researchers conducted interviews with human resource executives, managers, and professionals in 18 partner companies to chronicle their ongoing experiences and extract key learnings for moving forward as COVID-19 wanes. Their full report titled "The Future of Remote Work in the Time of COVID-19" is available on the CAHRS web site. Here the focus is on some of the key learnings and their implications for going forward.

Bottom line, the firms studied were planning to abandon all-in remote work as soon as possible and transition to various versions of hybrid work – blends of on-site and remote work. Some of what they learned from their remote work experiences will translate directly to their new circumstances. Some will require modification. And a few new issues will arise as well.

Culture

During COVID-19, most of the firms studied learned to operate more organically. Executives had little choice but to throttle back on the control button; embrace the reality of rapid, systemic, rather than incremental, change; and countenance unplanned paths to uncertain futures. Managers and supervisors strove to become more adept at leading people rather than managing work, trusting and empowering employees, focusing less on process and more on results, and keeping a close eye on employees’ needs and concerns. Techies accelerated the acquisition of appropriate technologies, most notably online collaboration tools, operationalized quick fixes to digital infrastructures and security systems, and assisted with essential training. Employees, in turn, assumed responsibility for attaining results, working hard (in many cases too hard), and actively experimenting with new, more agile ways of collaborating, cooperating, and problem-solving in real time.

These are valuable lessons for firms facing more flexible and nimble futures, irrespective of where they land on the spectrum of hybrid work.



Performance, Overwork, Burnout and Work-Life Challenges

Productivity levels remained constant or even improved as employees went all remote. Better supervision and improved working relationships helped, as did efficiency-enhancing modifications to team processes and procedures. But employees also found themselves working longer hours, often much longer hours, than before. They felt a need to be online and available as much as possible, while also experiencing perceived pressure to respond promptly to flurries of emails and other inquiries, along with demands for online meetings at odd hours. Only nine of the 18 firms took direct actions to control overwork by, for example, restricting meeting times or enforcing demarcations between work and non-work times.

Predictably, there were frequent reports of overwork, burnout, “Zoom fatigue”, and stresses on work-family relationships, especially among parents with children at home. Three fourths of the firms addressed these symptoms, often in multiple ways. Temporary relief came in the form of flexible work scheduling, additional paid time off, and leaves of absence. To enhance physical well-being, firms subsidized the purchase of ergonomically sound office furniture, workout equipment, and fitness apps. They funded meditation and mental wellness apps and beefed-up their own Employee Assistance Programs and counseling services. Harried parents got grants to cover costs of childcare, tutors, and college preparation services.

As they transition to hybrid work, more firms will find it necessary to address the issue of chronic overwork directly. And to reexamine the panoply of palliative benefits. Do those aimed at remote employees also pertain to others working on-site? If not, what will firms offer the latter to not only facilitate their physical and mental well-being, but also maintain equity?

Connectivity and Socialization

Over time, remote workers began to miss the organic interactions common in workplace settings, including informal discussions with co-workers that often generate useful ideas, not to mention valued friendships. In response, three-quarters of the firms studied attempted to recreate these organic interactions online with virtual happy hours, cooking classes, fitness and yoga classes, and so on. At first, these activities seemed to help, but all too often they simply exacerbated “Zoom fatigue” and participation dwindled.

Connectivity and socialization improve in hybrid work situations since remote workers can visit on-site locations periodically for in-person meetings and even social gatherings. But care must be taken to avoid “us vs. them” situations where one group internally shares important information that the other isn’t privy to. One way to promote widespread transparency is to habitually document the essence of important meetings and other substantive discussions and post the notes, slides, and so forth online.

Onboarding and Initial Training

Several firms in the study had difficulty onboarding new employees, in part because their cultures were evolving, but also because a lot was lost when trying to convey the subtleties of core values and baseline beliefs virtually. An analogous challenge arose when it came to developing new employees, absent the personal touches and flexibility of in-person coaching. Attempts to create online “buddy systems” were helpful, but insufficient.



These, too, are challenges that dissipate somewhat in hybrid work situations, again because it is possible to do most onboarding and initial training on-site.

Unaddressed Topics

Of course, additional research is required. Not only to dig more deeply into the foregoing issues, but also to investigate matters that didn't arise in this study such as diversity and inclusion, performance management, compensation, and the design of (presumably smaller and cheaper) on-site facilities. CAHRS partner companies interested in participating in future studies of these and related matters are encouraged to contact Professor Brad Bell, the Academic Director of CAHRS, to discuss possibilities.

This ResearchBrief by the following two authors is based on the White Paper "The Future of Remote Work in the Time of COVID-19"



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