

Five Ways Leaders Can Support Remote Work

Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Josh Bersin

The rapid shift to remote work has created new challenges for organizations, but survey data shows organizations around the world are experimenting with creative solutions.



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many employees to work from home, and the magnitude of the shift to remote work is staggering. Before the pandemic, about 15% of U.S. employees were working from home at least some of the time. ¹ During the first half of April, half of U.S. employees were doing all of their work remotely. ²

This rapid shift has surfaced challenges with remote work that may have escaped people's notice when the practice was more limited in scope. To understand these challenges, we conducted two surveys in April. During the first half of the month, we surveyed 441 global HR leaders, asking about the most pressing issues they were facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, what actions they had taken, and what had worked well in their organizations. ³ Several of their top concerns — protecting the health and well-being of employees (listed by 22% of all respondents), preserving jobs

(12%), and complying with government regulations (6%) — reflected the challenges of dealing with the public health crisis and economic downturn.

Many of the most frequently cited issues, however, stemmed from the abrupt surge in remote work. One-fifth of all HR leaders mentioned the general challenge of transitioning from onsite to remote work, and others listed specific concerns, including keeping remote employees engaged (17%), productive (7%), and connected (5%).

Widespread remote work has created new challenges, but the good news is that organizations around the world are experimenting with creative solutions to these problems. To learn more about these experiments and which ones are working, we conducted a second survey focused on the transition to remote work in the second half of April. The **COVID-19 Pulse of HR** platform is an interactive site that can crowdsource organizational experiments in real time. To prioritize which approaches are most promising, we used an interface developed by **Waggl** that displays a series of side-by-side comparisons of answers and lets users vote so that the most popular suggestions climb up the leaderboard. ⁴

Over 400 HR leaders and other employees participated in the second survey, where they described the most meaningful actions their organizations are taking to support remote work. ⁵ The respondents represented a cross-section of organizations, ranging from startups to large

enterprises across 19 industries, but nearly all (93%) worked in organizations where a significant percentage of employees were working from home as a result of COVID-19.

To identify important themes in their responses, we used a natural language processing platform developed at MIT that classifies text into hundreds of granular topics and actions

leaders can take, such as “share best practices on remote work” and “organize virtual social activities,” with high levels of accuracy. We aggregated related topics into six broad themes that together captured the majority of the ideas mentioned. (See “How Organizations Can Help Employees Transition to Remote Work.”)

How Organizations Can Help Employees Transition to Remote Work

The authors surveyed more than 350 HR leaders and other employees at the end of April 2020 and asked them to describe the most meaningful actions their organizations had taken to support their transition to remote work during the COVID-19 crisis. Using a natural language processing platform developed by CultureX, the authors clarified responses into hundreds of granular topics and aggregated topics under six broad categories.

47%**Communicate frequently and well**

- 23%** High-quality communication
- 12%** Frequent communication
- 5%** Solicit input from employees
- 3%** Provide clear guidance on policies
- 2%** Transparent communication
- 2%** Central repository of COVID-19-related information

29%**Provide emotional & social support**

- 11%** Check in on employees
- 6%** Support employee mental well-being
- 5%** Provide emotional support
- 4%** Organize virtual social activities
- 2%** Senior leaders support employees

24%**Maintain productivity & engagement**

- 7%** Share remote work best practices
- 6%** Help employees remain productive
- 4%** Frequent virtual meetings
- 4%** Focus on keeping employees engaged
- 2%** Empower employees to work remotely
- 1%** Set clear performance expectations

45%**Provide technology for remote work**

- 25%** Provide or subsidize technology for remote work
- 12%** Provide or subsidize collaboration platforms
- 6%** Provide or subsidize home Wi-Fi
- 1%** Provide furniture for home office

18%**Promote work-life balance**

- 10%** Allow for flexibility in schedule
- 4%** Support working parents
- 2%** Extend time-off policies
- 2%** Help employees manage their workloads

15%**Ensure well-being**

- 11%** Promote physical well-being
- 2%** Extend health benefits
- 2%** Ensure onsite employees' safety

Source: The COVID-19 Pulse of HR survey was conducted by CultureX, Josh Bersin, and Waggl between April 19 and April 29, 2020.

Providing the hardware, internet support, and communication tools to enable remote work may sound like

basic blocking and tackling, and it is. Yet when asked what helped them transition to remote work, 45% of all respondents mentioned company-provided or -subsidized technology, including hardware, collaboration platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, high-bandwidth home Wi-Fi, or office furniture. Senior executives may take home-office essentials for granted, but many employees working remotely for the first time lack these basics.

Providing a stipend to buy new home-office equipment or sending employees a work-from-home technology kit is an up-front investment that organizations should not have to repeat. The other themes, however, will remain important beyond current stay-at-home orders. Most epidemiologists predict recurring outbreaks of COVID-19 — and periodic quarantines — until an effective vaccine is widely available.⁶ Even when herd immunity is achieved, many employees will continue to work at home, and some will move to permanent remote models. In fact, three quarters of financial executives plan to shift at least some of their workforces to full-time remote work after the pandemic subsides.⁷

The following five principles, based on our research, can help leaders more effectively manage a distributed workforce.

1. Maintain frequent, transparent, and consistent communication. When employees work from home, they can feel disconnected from their organizations, and nearly half (47%) of participants in our survey cited effective communication as crucial to their transition to remote work. Using natural language processing to identify key themes in responses, we determined that the most effective communication has five characteristics: It's frequent, transparent, part of a two-way dialogue, easy to navigate, and consistent. These communication principles are useful in general, but they're crucial when a company's workforce is distributed.

Frequent. More than 1 in 10 of all respondents listed frequent communication among the most useful ways their company supported their transition to remote work. To increase the frequency of communication, many organizations have instituted daily or weekly updates from the CEO and made them accessible to all employees in real

time. When it comes to the type of communication employees prefer on a frequent basis, video updates and webinars were deemed more effective than emails.

Transparent. Employees appreciated leaders who explained their decisions and clarified the rationale behind those choices. When listing what worked best, the second-ranked response emphasized “frequent and total transparency in communication regarding business impact, decision-making, board feedback, and leadership mindset.” Another HR leader noted the importance of “being transparent about the financial impact [COVID-19] is causing to the business and together discussing options for keeping everyone instead of laying people off.”

Two-way. Employees consistently valued tools such as weekly pulse surveys or dedicated COVID-19 email accounts that allowed them to share anonymous feedback and ask questions in real time. Virtual town halls and fireside chats provided another setting for employees to express their concerns and pose questions. Some employers created COVID-19 response teams focused on soliciting concerns and questions from employees, finding the right person to respond, and communicating the answers quickly and widely throughout the organization.

Easy to navigate. Several respondents singled out centralized information hubs on issues related to remote work and COVID-19. Highly ranked resources included frequently asked questions (updated daily), virtual training resources on trending topics (such as managing virtual teams and leading online meetings), archived video messages from leaders, and remote-work success stories from colleagues. They also highlighted the need to communicate clear guidelines on HR policies that were particularly relevant during COVID-19, such as sick days, time off, and expected work hours.

Consistent. The most commonly cited obstacle to effective communication was conflicting messages from different parts of the organization. Different functions, including HR, finance, legal, and operations, should send a unified message to all stakeholders, including front-line employees, remote workers, vendors, subcontractors, consultants, and customers. Middle managers and front-line team leads need to confirm that their communication is consistent with the

top team's messaging.

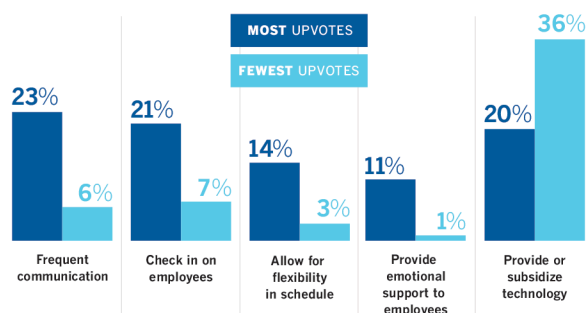
2. Provide support for physical and mental health. In the midst of a global pandemic, it's not surprising that 15% of respondents pointed to company-sponsored COVID-19 tests, masks, and flu vaccines as positive actions their companies had taken to protect employees' physical well-being. What is surprising is that employees were nearly twice as likely (29%) to praise steps to foster mental wellness and help them combat social isolation.

Social isolation among remote workers is not a new challenge — in fact, 6 of every 10 remote workers reported that they felt isolated before COVID-19 — but the pandemic

has helped bring the issue into focus.⁸ The most effective step to battle isolation, according to our survey, is regular check-ins by managers to see how their employees are doing personally and professionally, an approach that was mentioned by 1 of every 10 people who completed the COVID-19 Pulse of HR survey. When more than 2,000 visitors to the platform ranked a list of responses, the answers that mentioned employee check-ins were among the most highly rated. Top-quartile responses (based on positive votes received) mentioned employee check-ins 21% of the time, versus 7% of responses in the bottom quartile. (See “How Employees Rated Actions Taken to Enhance Remote Work.”)

How Employees Rated Actions Taken to Enhance Remote Work

The authors surveyed 350 HR leaders and other employees to determine the most meaningful actions their organizations had taken to support remote work during the COVID-19 crisis. These responses were aggregated into six main categories, and 2,000 people voted on which responses they found most valuable. Responses are divided into quartiles based on the number of positive votes, or “upvotes,” they received.



Source: The COVID-19 Pulse of HR survey was conducted by CultureX, Josh Bersin, and Waggl between April 19 and April 29, 2020.

Virtual social activities, such as lunch and learns, coffee breaks, online exercise classes, and happy hours, were also frequently mentioned as ways companies can help employees overcome social isolation. These activities were not as highly ranked by voters as personal check-ins and were as likely to be mentioned in bottom-quartile responses as they were in top-quartile ones. Things like online happy hours and yoga classes are a fine way to facilitate social bonding, but they cannot substitute for leaders personally

touching base with their teams.

More generally, employees appreciated emotional support, especially from senior executives. One CEO, for example, called every employee who tested positive for COVID-19, and another sent gourmet cookies and a personal note to all employees. The senior leaders of a retailer established a fund to help employees who were in need, and they personally made large contributions.

Employees also valued corporate initiatives explicitly designed to help them manage stress and maintain mental well-being. Specific initiatives included starting an online discussion board on mental health, sharing mental wellness resources, launching anonymous telehealth counseling services, and coaching managers on how to discuss stress and mental wellness with their teams.

3. Help distributed employees stay productive and engaged.

Remote work can boost productivity, particularly on stand-alone tasks that require minimal coordination with colleagues. Allowing employees to work from home increased the productivity of patent examiners by 4%, for example, and call center employees by 13%.⁹ When employees need to collaborate with other teams, however, working from home may decrease productivity.¹⁰ One effective short-term step, according to our survey results, is for leaders to acknowledge that productivity may dip during the lockdown and to let employees know that it is acceptable.

Longer term, however, organizations will need to evaluate the performance of remote workers. Most employers have not yet cracked that code. The same study that found that remote call center workers were more productive also discovered that they were less likely to be promoted than their onsite peers.¹¹ Our analysis of over 1.4 million **Culture 500 employee reviews** from more than 500 of the largest employers in the United States found that employees who enjoyed remote work were more likely to speak negatively about how well their organization recognized and rewarded performance, their chances for promotion, and clarity of job expectations.¹² As more work is done remotely, organizations need to rethink performance evaluations to ensure that they are not penalizing productive employees because of insufficient face time in the office.¹³

Frequent, short meetings can boost productivity. Employees might grumble about meetings under normal circumstances, but many COVID-19 Pulse of HR respondents said that daily team huddles helped them remain focused and engaged while working remotely. Structured mechanisms to share best practices and tips on remote work were also popular. Executives and board

members at one company used their twice-per-week all-hands meetings to share examples of what was working (and not working) while remote, and another company collected and relayed employees' success stories on its intranet.

4. Manage the paradox of remote work-life balance. When it comes to work-life balance, remote work poses a paradox. On the one hand, working from home cuts down on commuting and allows people to adjust their schedules and spend more time with their families. One 2017 study showed that employees were willing to accept a pay cut of 8% if they could work from home rather than in an office.¹⁴ The popularity of remote work helps explain why the number of U.S. employers offering a work-from-home option doubled, by some measures, in the decade before the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁵

On the other hand, remote work can leave employees feeling like they must be available 24-7 and work more hours, and it can blur the boundary between their professional and personal lives. Research has consistently shown that remote workers log more hours than their onsite counterparts.¹⁶ A Gallup poll conducted before the COVID-19 outbreak found that U.S. employees worked an extra hour per day when working remotely, but a study by NordVPN found that remote workers have been logged on for two to three more hours per day during the quarantine than they were before the lockdown.¹⁷ When remote work is mandatory and children's schools and day care facilities are closed, it is, of course, even harder to maintain the boundary between work and professional life.

The most popular way to help employees manage work-life balance, mentioned by 10% of respondents, was making allowances for them to adjust their schedules to accommodate personal obligations. The figure below lists some of the most highly ranked ways that organizations helped their employees maintain work-life balance while working remotely. Other popular policies included adjusting employees' workloads to accommodate family responsibilities and making it easier for employees to take paid time off.

How to Help Employees Maintain Work-Life Balance While Working Remotely

This figure shows quotes from respondents in the COVID-19 Pulse of HR Survey related to helpful strategies organizations are taking to ensure work-life balance.



Source: The COVID-19 Pulse of HR survey was conducted by CultureX, Josh Bersin, and Waggl between April 19 and April 29, 2020.

5. Don't lose sight of your strategic priorities. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, more than 70% of S&P 500 companies published strategic priorities — forward-looking objectives that focus an organization's attention on the handful choices that matter most to success in the future.¹⁸ Common strategic priorities include improving products and services, accelerating innovation, making operations more efficient, developing talent, and executing a digital transformation, among others.¹⁹

It's understandable that a once-in-a-lifetime crisis would distract leaders from their existing priorities, but it's also a mistake. In many cases, strategic objectives set before COVID-19 will remain as important or even more critical in the future. The shift to remote work, however, creates new challenges to achieving these objectives. Gaining market share is hard under the best of circumstances, let alone when market demand is collapsing. Leaders must figure out how to build and sustain a healthy corporate culture when most

employees are working from home.

The shift to remote work, however, also provides opportunities to accelerate progress on strategic priorities. Nearly 10% of respondents mentioned remote learning opportunities as one of the most effective steps their organization had taken to build their skills during the quarantine. The sudden shift to remote work provides organizations with an opportunity to rethink existing processes to boost efficiency and accelerate their digital transformations.

Remote work is here to stay and will bring new challenges and opportunities. Organizations around the world are experimenting with novel management practices to manage the transition to a more distributed workforce. We are still in the early days, and it's not yet clear which of these approaches will endure. Leaders cannot afford to wait for definitive results — they need to act now to help their employees and organizations shift to remote work. We hope

that our preliminary **findings** will help leaders as they navigate into an uncertain future.

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