How to retool remote work for the long haul

Brian Dolan   July 13, 2020

As the Global Covid-19 pandemic forced companies to disperse their workforce into their individual homes, many have been surprised to find how well it works. Even companies that adamantly opposed work from home options are finding that production has kept up with, and sometimes exceeded the pace of, their traditional model.

As the movement to ease restrictions grows, these companies are taking a hard look at what's been happening and taking serious consideration of whether this might be a better option long-term.

However, working from home when there are no other options and everyone is doing it is vastly different from working remotely for the long haul. It requires a fundamental shift in attitude along with establishing processes and systems that will support the long-term growth of the company.

Putting the "office" in home office

Going full-on or even partially remote for the long term calls

for a more systematic approach to setting up those home offices. Many have made do thus far with laptops set up on kitchen tables or makeshift desks in the corner of the bedroom. It works, but it's not ideal.

The best setup is a separate space with a door that employees can close to keep out distractions while they're working—and close behind them when they're done for the day. Companies that want to support employees remotely will need to give thought to helping workers get the equipment they need as well as outfitting a good setting. (An allowance for things like desk lamps, standing desks, or ergonomic chairs might be a new expense line for your company, but it's cheaper than fixed rent costs.)

Some employees will need more sophisticated equipment and tighter security measures. That should be taken into consideration when deliberating the potential for permanent remote. Is there a need for more monitors, sound systems, or video editing equipment? Can high enough security measures be installed? These questions are especially vital to healthcare companies and other businesses with a greater need for privacy. Some of what has been put in place for stay-at-home orders can continue, but there may be a need to reevaluate and restructure security measures if employees will remain permanently or mostly off-premise.

Building and maintaining culture from a

distance

One of the more complex and perhaps hidden challenges is maintaining the character and personality of an organization when people aren't spending large amounts of time together. For now, it's been a lot of make-do. Companies are coasting on the culture that was built in the years prior to being dispersed. It's easier to be in this together when everyone is in the same situation and it's temporary.

But as the weeks stretch into months and some people go back while others don't, there will be a need to build and maintain a sense of belonging to a team and organization—something that comes more naturally in a traditional office.

Now it comes through how meetings are handled, how communications are managed, and how connections are made within and across departments. Kearns & West, a US public policy consulting firm, used to have monthly management meetings, but since going remote, they've been meeting weekly. Team meetings were held quarterly but now happen every other week. And at a recent all-hands Zoom meeting, managing principal Sharif Ebrahim invited a group of goats on the line, with the help of a "[Goat 2 Meeting](#)" virtual farm tour arranged by animal sanctuary Charlie's Acres, to spice up the gathering.

"I felt like we needed to do something unexpected,

particularly for people who were feeling isolated," he said. "We were concerned about the toll sheltering in place has taken. ... We're trying to figure out how to make the firm gatherings more fun, how to make more connections and how to have conversations."

Of course, some employees, especially younger workers who don't have families at home, may prefer the camaraderie of a traditional office. After all, not everyone is set up for working from home and not everyone thrives on their own. Companies that start out as fully remote work get around this by seeking out employees who have the will and temperament to be on their own. Companies that have been pushed into remote work and don't want to go back to the traditional model will need to be more mindful of keeping workers engaged and motivated without a central location.

One option is a mixed approach, with some days in the office for those who want it. Another is renting space in a co-working site, where small groups of employees could work together or at least be around others who are working—which would cost significantly less than a full office.

Planning for the unplanned connections

People can follow along in the direction they've been headed at least until they can get back together. But what happens if you don't get back together?

It starts with being aware of the value of unstructured conversations and interactions. Along with preserving culture, there is a need to foster the serendipitous moments that lead to innovations, connections, and new directions. These are the discussions that happen outside of meetings, in the hallways, on the elevator, at the water cooler, or in other relaxed moments between intensive focus on projects. If it's all long-distance, then time has to be set aside for calls or video conferencing that is intentionally relaxed and open.

A word about productivity

What won't change regardless of where employees work is the focus on and concerns around productivity. Will the work get done? It is for now, and that certainly is reassuring for those who thought productivity would lapse if employees weren't under watchful eyes in the office. But this is admittedly an artificial situation. Perhaps there is more focus on work because so many are stuck working from home, with limited opportunities for distraction. There may also be an added sense of urgency around that work that needs to be done given the pandemic and the resulting economic situation. What will happen when that urgency subsides and people have more options in where they can be?

Based on the experience of remote companies prior to the pandemic, productivity while working at home can certainly continue to match if not exceed that in a traditional central

office. It is important, however, to foster it by being clear about expectations and deliverables. It's less about schedules and strict oversight than outlining what has to get done and then giving employees the freedom to do that in the best way possible. Certainly, companies have been working on this since they were forced to shutter their office doors. But if remote is to become the new normal, employers will need to review and redefine roles and work guidelines.

It's clear that the remote work movement has gained speed with a forced shutdown. But this is just the proof of concept. There's plenty of room for retooling from here.

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