
Remote working in the time of covid-19: developing a web-based community

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to provide suggestions for the implementation of remote working under enforced lockdown as experienced in many countries facing the consequences of the covid-19 virus. The author addresses the singularities and challenges of implementing remote working as a consequence of lockdown. Several measures for organisations are proposed, like the technological implementation of the technology and the importance of maintaining a routine to provide continuity, but also the need to be flexible towards the employees, the need to keep and adapt quality standards and to trust the motivation of the employees to do a good job. From an employee perspective, there is the need to create a personal routine, to set rules and have a working space, to use the right tools to communicate with colleagues and show up for online meetings, remaining in a positive frame of mind.

Keywords: remote working; covid-19; teleworking; lockdown.

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1 Introduction

Crises like the current covid-19 virus, also known as coronavirus, often hasten future development that was expected and awaited, but which was also thought of as being in the distant future. In the same way in which the increase in oil prices in the early 1970s impacted societies at large, and some industries in particular, for example, the car industry, the covid-19 virus will impact some industries more acutely than others. Possible social consequences could be the (even faster) phase-out of the use of cash as a means of payment, as cash carries viruses and bacteria. An increase in online shopping and home deliveries, initially a way to avoid exposure to disease, could transform retail. Learning and adapting strategies from the covid-19 virus experience can prepare organisations for future crises, which is necessary as we are currently ill-prepared (Koonin, 2020).

A key change facing businesses has been the (often) externally implemented work-from-home directive demanding that ever-increasing numbers of people work remotely. The covid-19 pandemic can be used by organisations as a learning experience to further develop remote working and to better navigate future challenges, helpfully creating a web-based community for all its users. As a consequence of the lockdown measures that some countries – like Italy, Spain and France, among others – have been taking, remote working has become the new norm for many organisations. Remote working forces organisations to adapt to a new paradigm on how work is conducted in general, but it also has implications for every single aspect of the organisational dynamics. This new environment requires organisations to be agile in their management of the situation (Abdelhamid and Sposato, 2019).

According to the media system dependency theory, there is a direct link between the media and how it helps the user to meet his/her needs. Consequently, this creates a relationship where the better able the media is to fulfil the needs of the user, the more dependent the user is on the media (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). In this case, for remote working to be effective, it has to be relevant as a media for all its users, not only for work-related issues but also as a space for members of an organisation to socialise, moving away from strictly professional issues (Akbari, 2019). Arguably the best way to do this is by creating a web-based community that helps its members not only to accomplish their work but also to develop in a personal and professional manner (de Vries and Kommers, 2004). Some of the new challenges brought about by remote working include how to physically deliver work when it is not possible to be physically present, how businesses can maintain quality and consistency, how to motivate people who are working remotely, and how to successfully implement new technologies. These challenges have to be addressed and overcome if an organisation is to succeed.

This article addresses the new challenges that may arise for organisations migrating to remote working due to the unexpected covid-19 pandemic, and the lockdown measures that have been implemented by governments and organisations, leading to many millions of workers migrating to remote working with very short notice and limited training. Based on an academic literature review, this article addresses problems and suggests actions and strategies, both for organisations redesigning their work and for employees working remotely.

In addition to the technological implementation of the technology, it is important to maintain a routine to provide continuity, but also to be flexible towards the employee, and it is necessary to keep and adapt quality standards and to trust the motivation of the employees to do a good job (Craven et al., 2020). From an employee perspective there is a need to create a personal routine, to set rules and have a working space, to use the right tools to communicate with colleagues and show up for online meetings, remaining in a positive frame of mind. Hopefully, these suggestions, based on the literature review, will help the organisation to create an online community. To a certain extent, technology allows employees to be in a place without actually being in the place (Jeffrey et al., 2019).

It is not possible to standardise remote working as every single job is different, with different inputs, outputs and requirements (Donnelly and Johns, 2020). However, the following advice is based on educational institutions – universities in this case – which are some of the pioneering organisations to fully transition to remote working as a consequence of the covid-19 pandemic (Beech and Anseel, 2020). In this case, universities provide a positive example of organisations that can change and adapt from

face-to-face service delivery to an online system in an extremely short time (Brouns et al., 2011).

Since the outbreak of the covid-19 virus, countries like Mainland China, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates, Spain, and the USA, among many others, have formally suspended in-classroom classes and migrated to different online platforms. Universities provide a unique example for learning as the delivery of services in the industry has two main features: it tends to be highly planned and standardised but it also contains an element of creativity. The core function of the delivery of the service is fairly repetitive, with most of the same content being taught year after year. Yet the way it is delivered changes with each different cohort and student. The forced implementation of distance learning has required both students and staff to adapt to new technologies, perhaps showing them that distance learning is easier than previously thought. Once users realise that it is possible and positive to learn remotely, this could have a direct impact on the future of education and how it is delivered, introducing more technology into the education process and changing the industry forever. Yet, as noted by Oliveira and Garcia (2019), the main challenge is the limited engagement that some users may show with online initiatives.

2 Organisational challenges

2.1 Technological implementation

Tools for remote working and online learning have been available for a long time, but most organisations have not been forced to put them in place until now. As such, the first decision an organisation must make when implementing these technologies for the first time is whether to pay or use the free version of the same online platforms. For those organisations taking a short-term approach, free versions/trials of the software will be enough. However, if organisations acknowledge that the current pandemic and the shift to remote working will have future implications, they should take the time to evaluate a wide range of paid-for tools, as these may become central to their future work dynamics and strategies. It is not a surprise that technological support plays a central role in the ability of remote workers to perform (Allen et al., 2015), therefore organisations should provide the best technical support that they can afford to facilitate the work of everyone in the organisation, in an environment where lockdown measures, social distancing and remote working are here to stay for the foreseeable future.

2.2 Utilise standard schedules and timetables

Broadly speaking, the migration to online learning has been done while keeping the standard pre-existing timetables. As we all know, this is not strictly necessary, as online learning can afford its users a certain amount of flexibility. However, using existing timetables, class schedules and online meetings provides users with a sense of structure and familiarity in an online environment, regardless of the flexibility (López Jiménez et al., 2020a).

2.3 *Migrate quality standards*

The changes from offline to online should be accompanied by the maintenance of quality standards – the same standards that were expected in the office should be maintained online. However, measurements of quality should be added to reflect the new circumstances. For instance, the focus of evaluations should be on achieving the expected objectives, and not on attending meetings or being present online during the standard office hours. As this is a new type of work there is a need to create expectations that are reasonable within these new conditions (Staples et al., 1999).

2.4 *Trust*

Greer and Payne (2014) have identified the most prominent challenge facing this new digital working environment to be the lack of face-to-face communication and the benefits associated with it. A lack of face time in the office leads to several problems, but arguably the most important is a lack of trust in employees (Fauzi, 2019). As they are not physically present it can be more difficult to make sure everyone is doing their job as they should. Consequently, a lack of trust in the employees starts to emerge as a problem. Organisations have to learn to trust their employees and to acknowledge that working from home does not mean a day off. Any successful implementation of any type of remote working has to be based on an understanding that employees are motivated to do a good job, regardless of where they are working, without having a manager looking over their shoulders (López Jiménez et al., 2020b).

2.5 *Flexibility*

As the covid-19 pandemic demands widespread lockdown this new environment requires flexibility from organisations towards their employees. The closure of educational institutions adds to the responsibilities of parents with school aged children, placing an extra burden of care on parents. Many workers may also have to care for sick relatives, which is likely to be more widespread during a pandemic. In normal circumstances, childcare responsibilities are one of the main challenges of remote working (Mustafa and Gold, 2013), and the situation is exacerbated by the closure of schools and childcare facilities. Facing the challenge, organisations should show a human side and provide their employees with reasonable options to be able to accommodate all their responsibilities. As always, the emphasis should be on achieving objectives using the flexibility that online tools provide, and not on presenteeism.

2.6 *Evaluation*

There are several techniques for evaluating the success of remote working. Preece et al. (2004) have suggested some techniques to evaluate online communities, such as the number of members, engagement of the members or a heuristic evaluation, among others. For the evaluation, every organisation should find the method that aligns best with its organisational goals. Nevertheless, the principles of the media system dependency theory should also apply, where the more relevant a system is the more dependency it creates, not only for the professional needs but also for the social aspects of the members.

3 Advice for employees

Maintain regular hours and create a routine. Time spent at home in lockdown can sometimes feel devoid of a structure, but remote workers should aim to create a daily routine independent of work commitments. This is important not only for maintaining productivity, but also to ensure employees are able to stop working and switch off. One of the main challenges identified by Felstead and Henseke (2017) as a consequence of remote working is the inability of workers to create a boundary between their professional work and the rest of their everyday routine. This can create work-life imbalance and potentially negatively impact the mental health and productivity of employees (Sposato and Jeffrey, 2019).

3.1 *Set ground rules and create your own working space*

In addition to having a standard routine, employees must make some adjustments to ensure remote working is a successful endeavour. If possible, a dedicated workspace should be delineated for work-related activities. This could lead to a better division between work and other responsibilities when working from home. Moreover, some personal ground rules should be set to ensure ‘office hours’ are in fact office hours, and the time dedicated to working is productive. The use of a browser application to block social media on the computer, or flight mode on cell phones during working hours, could help to prevent distractions. This measure could also aid the establishment of clear boundaries between work and non-work activities.

3.2 *Tools and communication*

Perhaps the main challenge facing remote working is the fact that it creates a new environment for communication, where face-to-face meetings are no longer possible and new alternatives emerge (Garcia-Carbonell et al., 2016). There is no substitute for an in-person meeting, but in this new scenario, employees should use the full range of tools at their disposal. Online platforms for meetings are a useful tool, but interaction should not be limited only to this, as quite often a simple old-fashioned telephone call, or a voice note on WhatsApp, could be more effective. The aim should always be to communicate the message and get the idea across, regardless of the tool used (Hunter, 2019).

3.3 *Show up for online meetings*

In this new working environment, where face-to-face meetings are replaced by online meetings, everyone needs to make sure they join these meetings, even if they are not always relevant (which is also the case with face-to-face meetings). The new remote working dynamics limit the possibilities for day-to-day interactions and consequently online meetings are one of the few opportunities for people to come together and bond over work-related issues. Even if online meetings are not a complete substitute for face-to-face ones, this will address one of the main challenges in remote working identified by researchers, which is the inability of remote workers to interact with colleagues in regular office settings (Rockmann and Pratt, 2015).

3.4 *Be positive*

Even though remote working has been implemented relatively quickly and without much room for training and testing, this is the current state of affairs, so having a positive attitude can help you stay motivated. Make the best of the new situation by learning to use the new technologies provided to you; most tools for online working are relatively easy to operate and quite straightforward. There may be an increase in the job satisfaction of remote workers (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), but at the moment this is happening under special circumstances where remote work is imposed on organisations rather than designed by them. It is also important that people remain curious about these new tools, how they work and how to get the best out of them.

4 **Conclusions**

Based on the reviewed literature, this article has provided evidence-based ideas to confront the current challenges facing organisations as they are directed to move towards remote working. The aim of any remote working measures developed to address the crisis engendered by the covid-19 pandemic should be not only to accomplish the organisational goals but also to develop a web-based community that could increase the effectiveness of remote working and create a media system that fosters engagement among its users.

The current migration to remote working brought on by the outbreak of the covid-19 virus has led almost every organisation to implement contingency plans and develop new strategies. These plans have been developed relatively quickly to address the challenges that the pandemic resents, limiting the opportunities for training and testing of the new strategies. It would be unreasonable to expect contingency measures implemented out of necessity to work as well as business as usual. Organisations should accept that the new way of remote working will not be the same as the old way of working and, consequently, a period of adaptation is needed. Mistakes will be made and it will take some time until a new business as usual is reached.

This article has suggested actions and strategies to be developed and implemented to make these transitions as smooth as possible, benefiting both the organisation and employees. The way we used to work until recently has been challenged and the image of what a standard job looks like will potentially be transformed forever. The most successful organisations of the future will be those that learn from the current crisis to ensure preparedness for the next. Those organisations will use this opportunity to transition by ensuring that remote working is a more permanent fixture, even when the virus is under control. This could range from working remotely a few days a week for some employees to whole departments going online. Future research should address this contextual singularity, leading to potential comparative research on the differences between the planned implementation of remote working versus its implementation as a reactive measure.

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