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Remote Work: Tackling Its Toll on Businesses

Workflow, collaboration, mentoring often suffer

Remote work, according to common wisdom, is crucial to keep employees safe and help businesses continue operations during the pandemic. The reality, however, is much more complicated.

When the Covid-19 crisis hit, working from home seemed like a simple solution and boasted multiple benefits. Now, it's apparent that complex issues abound. For example, online meetings lack the advantages of those held in person. Body language, so vital to communication, fails to come through a screen. And collaboration is most effective in person, where nonverbal cues come to the forefront. Creativity is diminished, because impromptu — and even planned — brainstorming misses out on the synergy generated by interactivity. Without that energy, inventiveness is impossible.

Socialization — an important tool to develop and advance a firm's corporate culture as well as enable effective communication — falls by the wayside. Virtual alternatives, like video conferencing, do offer certain pluses, such as time efficiencies and the ability to team with geographically dispersed participants. Useful, but the physical closeness and collaborative atmosphere fostered by being in an office are significantly lessened.

In the office, it's also easy to stop by someone's desk or have a quick hallway conversation to answer a question. "Remotely," says Antonio Argibay, AIA, managing principal and founder, Meridian Design Associates Architects, "you have to devote more time to accom-



plish tasks that might take a quick face-to-face in the office.”

From a personal perspective, some employees may find that work/life separation is hard to achieve. And loneliness is a particularly compelling problem. Many people miss the community aspects of working in the office, which is tricky to replicate online. Zoom-based happy hours are just not the same. And the lack of traditional networking, which particularly impacts women per recent media reports, can hinder one’s career advancement.

Junior employees miss out on mentoring

Mentoring is a must for junior employees, especially for those right out of school. Nothing matches learning new skills side-by-side with more senior colleagues, Argibay notes. Remote work makes this unfeasible. “We’re missing out on preparing the next generation of employees to perform in an independent, efficient way,” says Argibay. “Until everyone is back in the office, it’s essential to create a way to promote mentoring. This can be accomplished in part by making professional development a top priority.”

If business is slow, managers should encourage employees to double down on training. This commitment will yield great results when they return to the physical workplace. And innovation counts too. For example, investing in new software and training to enable staffers to work more successfully from home or the office can contribute to better outcomes.

Overcoming leadership challenges

“Outside the normal office environment, leading effectively is difficult to achieve,” explains Argibay. To be most effective, leaders should regularly connect with staff via phone and text, as well as email. They should have ongoing scheduled discussions, working in, as appropriate, empathy and understanding of the staffer’s situation.

“Emotional intelligence is especially critical nowadays — people are suffering,” says Argibay, “and we can’t overlook the stresses and strains staff members are experiencing as a result of the pandemic, compounded by social dislocation. It’s okay to ask how they’re doing. Being attentive shows you care about the person.”

A people-first approach is a key element for all employee contact. “The most important asset a company has is its people, so put them first,” says Argibay. “This is a philosophy that we strictly adhere to at Meridian, and through hard times such as this, the focus on our staff has enabled us to continue to produce excellent work. And, most important, it helps us retain our employees, who know they are first and foremost in our thinking.”

While the current state of affairs can be overwhelming, leaders should plan for the post-Covid future, when there will likely be more emphasis than before on a flexible, adaptable work/life relationship. “Think about how your company culture will evolve to be more supportive of workers, who in turn will be open to understanding and buying into that culture,” says Argibay.

What’s next: possible move to a hybrid approach



As the crisis starts to abate, companies may consider staying with aspects of the remote work model, transitioning to a hybrid approach. That might entail dedicated office hours for interaction and collaboration, with work-at-home at other points. The key is for each company to find its own balance between on-site and remote — to ensure maximum success.

What’s vital right now? Communicate frequently with employees on both professional and personal issues, make the most of digital tools and step up training in preparation for a return to the office.

“There is no panacea,” says Argibay. “Full-time remote work is simply not sustainable in the long run for most businesses. But for the short term, to keep employees engaged, leaders must nurture their company culture and values. Cultivating strong relationships, being emotionally available to staffers will be remembered and appreciated when the virus is behind us, and we can finally return to normal working conditions.”



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