Six Tips on How to Keep Your Workforce Engaged While Working Remotely

By Cameron Love | Hughes Marino Blog

This is not meant to be a scientific essay and I certainly haven't used an empirical process. I've interviewed a handful of business leaders and friends and I reference an incredibly insightful report from *Buffer* and *AngelList's* "*2020 State of Remote Work*" to bring perspective to a shared experience that millions of the American workforce now face. Everyone I spoke with is fortunate enough to have a career or role which allows them to work from home (commonly referred to as "WFH," so I'll reference the acronym for brevity).

Our recognition and praise should be with the scientists and doctors, EMTs and first responders, with nursing home staff, grocers and small businesses who are unable to WFH. We should also remind ourselves that the "black swan event" that is the COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread public (and mental) health impact will be temporary. What I've grown to understand outlasts the panic and hysteria and is the unflappable drive for moving forward, carpe diem and the desire to better the collective experience for our families, friends, coworkers and neighbors. So why don't we focus on that...
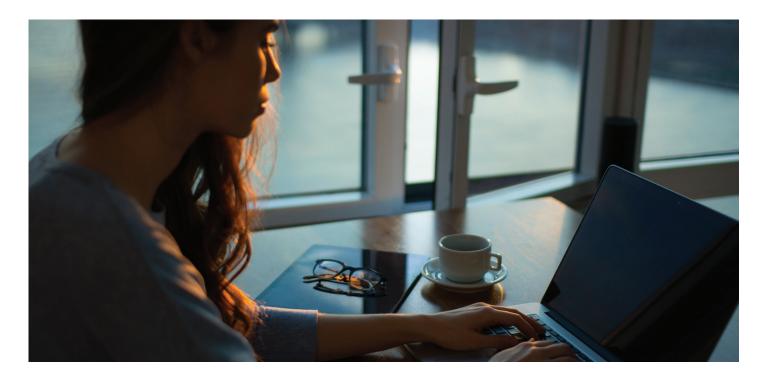
It's estimated that half of the current American workforce are millennials. As a millennial myself, and for most millennials I know, the stereotypes are certainly overplayed— yet our mastery of technology and collaboration, and an inclination towards independence is undeniable. These facts have brought the adoption of remote or distributed work policies from startup culture to Fortune 100 companies and even traditional professional service industries, such as law. According to *Buffer's* recent "*State of Remote Work*" report

which surveyed 3,500 remote workers from around the world, less than 41% of remote employees work for software companies.

Kyle Ladewig, founder of Out of Office, shared that it isn't just tech companies working this way. "This is a big misconception. Software companies might have been the first to adopt remote strategies, but we're well on our way to 'remote ubiquity,' with lots of other industries jumping in." Kyle started Out of Office and the Work Club platform as an easy way to get out of the house and meet people while you work. "I've met lawyers, doctors and even actors at Work Club. As long as some of your work can be done from a laptop—and let's face it, everyone uses email—then you can spend part of your week working remotely."

But it's not just email anymore. Zoom or WebEx for video conferencing, Slack or Microsoft Teams for messaging, collaborative documents like Google Docs and Box, not

to mention task and customer relationship management software—are all essential to remote work. I spoke with Maggie McKinney, a People and HR Operations Leader at Impira last week as their team issued a WFH mandate to allow their team members to practice social distancing. "Our company has a 25% distributed workforce, and we have established good protocols around documentation and communication. Having these tools up and running, with some team habits built around their use, has made transitioning to a fully remote team surprisingly seamless." Impira, an AI platform for automating workflow, has made a concerted effort to ensure its team is effective and engaged in their new environment. "We're running daily pulse surveys for feedback on our new fully virtual reality. This was an exercise intended to flag and respond to any issues quickly, but the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Our group working out of HQ is a social bunch with lots of opportunities for interaction, so we are experimenting with ways to fill in the gaps using virtual games and 'coffee breaks,' as well as setting good boundaries around our productive and available time. I think the normally distributed folks will see benefits from the exercise in empathy that we're all experiencing as remote employees and the adjustments we're making. I believe we'll come out a better company as a result."

Heather Doshay, Vice President of People at San Francisco -based Webflow, lives in Portland, Oregon herself. Leading a company which over half of her colleagues are distributed, Heather views their forward-thinking policies as a recruiting tool. "Companies who offer flexible work options tend to have employees who are more engaged and loyal to companies than those who don't. Flexible work is often cited as a top three reason to take a job after compensation, benefits and a good company culture." It's clear that Heather and her leadership team at Webflow are intentional and proactive in ensuring their team are extremely engaged and fulfilled in their roles away from headquarters. "It's a total myth that people who work remote aren't working as hard. It's the company's responsibility to support and empower distributed teams as a whole." Heather also believes that "leaders who doubt the potential of remote work and power of distributed teams will be eating their words in a matter of years."

The idea that a team member's desire for the flexibility to work from home is an indicator of laziness or unproductivity seems to be one of the biggest hurdles for business leaders. The, "if I can't see them, how do I know they are working?" mindset. According to Ladewig, "studies show that remote workers actually work more, and that the hours they work are more productive." Managers are worrying about the wrong things and "the biggest pitfall for remote managers is worrying way too much about employees 'being productive' and way too little about mental health."

In our current situation, I noticed widespread adoption of voluntary WFH polices over the past few weeks for companies in cities like San Francisco and Seattle in particular. As schools began to close this past week, the list of companies across the country closing their offices seemingly grows with each passing day.

However confident you are in your team's ability to stay productive away from the office, the prevailing truth and common experience for the American remote worker is a lack of space or a place in the home without distractions. While this isn't likely the advice you'd like to hear during a viral pandemic, "Get. Out. Of. The. House," says Ladewig. "It's that simple. The biggest myth of remote work is that everyone can be productive and happy working from home. But remote work doesn't always "work from home." Kyle interviewed more than 200 remote workers in the last year and said he only met one who was able to "lock herself in a room" every day without going crazy. "Distractions are part of the problem, but so is loneliness." According to *Buffer's* report the majority of remote work still occurs at home, as 80% of people said their home is the primary place of work, while mixing it up at a local coffee shop or co-working location on occasion. Furthermore, the remote workers surveyed said that communication, collaboration and loneliness were the top three struggles. These barriers are apparently most prevalent with teams when a minority of the distributed employees are interacting with a majority of their peers who remain office based.

For those who aren't feeling particularly prepared to take on an indefinite WFH mandate, here are a few tips to consider:

1. Create an Environment of Concentration

Find a space at home away from your television and high-traffic areas to minimize interruptions, and use noise-canceling headphones or a speaker to play relaxing music to stay tuned in with your company. While distractions are inevitable, by cultivating an environment of focus, you can automatically set yourself up for success in your new workspace.

2. Utilize Tech Tools

Transitioning from a desktop to a laptop can definitely present a new set of challenges! Using a mouse and keyboard will make working from your laptop much easier, and will also create a similar environment to your desk at your company's office, getting you in the right work mindset with easier ways to function. Bonus points for those who pull out their old monitor from storage!

3. Stick with a Regular Routine

Schedule your day like you would when coming into the office. Stick to your regular hours and follow your normal "getting ready" routine in the mornings to help your brain engage into work-mode.

4. Proactively Communicate with Your Teammates

Practice a "bias for action" and don't hesitate to ping your teammates for a question or pick up your phone to sync up quickly, just as you would if they were two desks away from you in the office. Our Hughes Marino core value #9 is to proactively communicate with everyone, and this is incredibly essential when team members are working remotely, for both productivity and mental health!

5. Practice Healthy Habits

Always remember to take breaks and eat lunch, and remain consistent in timing to get into a habit. While working from home, it can be easy to slip into a routine of immobility when you are working in isolation, which isn't healthy for anyone! It's incredibly important to get up and move around. Take a walk, do a workout routine in your garage on lunch, call a coworker to chat about life outside work during a break, or let your mind wander for fifteen minutes so you can come back refreshed and ready to jump back into the workday. Rely on timers to help you remember to stand up, eat and walk around to help you practice both healthy physical and mental habits.

6. Mentally Distance Yourself at the End of the Workday

When the workday is over, aim to leave your work area and close your computer. While it may take time, this will help to create a mental distance between yourself and the work, allow you to spend time with family and friends, and give your brain a much-needed break!

As the world emerges from social distancing and teams return to the office, the shared WFH experience will have a profound impact on our perception of remote work. Companies who have applied protocols and practices with virtual communication and documentation technology will likely lean in further to flexible work policies and trend towards a greater percentage of distributed workers. The business leaders who focus on the emotional well-being of their team outside of the office and foster a culture of trust will find the most success going forward.

A very special thanks to Kyle, Maggie and Heather for sharing their expert insight! □

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