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Wellbeing and remote working

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Remote work and "virtual" teams are becoming common particularly for knowledge work. A third of New Zealanders reported having worked from home in 2018, according to Statistics New Zealand, and this proportion was higher in those in their mid-career and with children.[1]

Remote work offers a number of advantages to both the organisation and an employee. Organisations can draw from a broader pool of talent geographically, employ people with family commitments that might prevent them being in the office full time, and can also cut overheads. Employees can do work they might not otherwise be able to do, or do it in an environment that better suits their preferences.

However, virtual teams bring a range of challenges, and wellbeing is an often overlooked one. Oftentimes, maintaining wellbeing is one of the reasons the team member is working remotely, such as when they want to work from home to support family commitments. Remote work can have an unanticipated impact on wellbeing in a range of areas.

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND SUPPORT

Work provides an important source of social contact, connection and belonging for many people. There is ample research supporting the benefits of a workplace where people feel accepted, supported and connected. Unfortunately, working remotely can shift the focus too heavily onto tasks, to the detriment of relationships. Remote workers can develop anxiety about being "out of sight, out of mind". A large survey of workers indicated that those working from home were more likely to report feeling left out, overlooked and that others were talking about them negatively. Remote employees also reported that complex or difficult relationships and interactions, such as office politics or conflict, were harder to navigate and ended up being more protracted than they needed to be.[2]

CULTURE AND BELONGING

Consider how you might deliberately build a shared identity in the team, and deliberately cultivate a sense of belonging in your remote team members. As there is less opportunity to build up implicit understanding of team communication patterns, expectations and goals, be more deliberate and formal about these at the outset of the arrangement, and check in on them regularly.[3] Also look to build connections between team members, rather than just with the team leader. This enhances collaboration, shared identity and has the added benefit of more team contact.

WORK AND LIFE BLENDING

The blurring of boundaries between work and home is one of the most reported negative impacts of working from home. Whilst organisations sometimes worry home life will interfere with work life, employees report the opposite is more often true, and working from home leads work life to intrude on home, for instance checking emails in the evenings.[4] Home workers even find it hard to "switch off" from work, because it is associated with the home environment.

SUGGESTIONS

- Set up a regular pattern of frequent check-ins. Where possible, make them as "high fidelity" as possible. Meet in person if possible,[5] videoconference if not, and phone call rather than email. Similarly, set up a rhythm of the team member dialling into team meetings and other collective conversations.

- Make general wellbeing and life events a deliberate part of conversations. This type of "chit-chat" helps build a sense of connection, some awareness of what might be going on in the employee's life and a sense of their baseline for wellbeing. Similarly, consider creating spaces for social "chit-chat" both online and in meetings, and set the example by participating in these.

- In addition, be available, and make an effort to respond quickly to your remote employee's communications, even if it is just to say, "Am engaged in something, will get back to you ASAP".

- Be conscientious about good communications. Make sure you provide context, all the relevant information and update people regularly on what is going on around the team, the office and the organisation. Perhaps most importantly, be clear on your expectations. This enables the employee to take advantage of the principal benefit of remote work – the opportunity to focus and make progress on tasks.

- Use technology to increase the frequency and quality of interactions. Videoconference if you can, phone call if you can, email as a last resort.

- Plan regular opportunities for face-to-face interactions.

- Encourage employees to have a designated workspace away from their main living space such as a spare room, study, or even the local café (some people maintain they can be more productive in a café[6] but confidential work should not be done there). Be clear that the aim is not to prevent them being distracted by home when working, but to prevent them being distracted by work outside of work hours.

- Provide information to employees on some the possible impacts of working from home and have a conversation about how you might, together, plan for them. As you generate the plan, reinforce that it is a dual responsibility, and the employee is to take responsibility for their side of the plan.

- Consider the other organisational policies and processes that might be relevant to those working from home, such as performance appraisals, for example. Discuss how remote working will impact on them, if productivity or teamwork are among the factors considered, how will this be assessed for a remote employee?

- The amount of time separated from the team appears to make a difference. Two days a week away from the team appears to allow for the benefits without many of the costs. If the weekly time working remotely is greater than this, you will need to be more deliberate and conscientious.

Fundamentally, focus on promoting relationships and proactively connecting with remote team members. If leader and manager are both committed to this, then that will address most of the pitfalls of remote work, and enable many of the advantages.

Read more from Umbrella on Remote Working

1 Statistics New Zealand. (2019). Over half of employees in New Zealand have flexible work hours. Stats NZ website. Accessed January 15, 2020, https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/over-half-of-employees-in-new-zealand-have-flexible-work-hours.

2 Grenny, J. & Maxfield, D. (2017). A study of 1,100 employees found that remote workers feel shunned and left out. *Harvard Business Review*, November 2. https://hbr.org/2017/11/a-study-of-1100-employees-found-that-remote-workers-feel-shunned-and-left-out.

3 Cristina B Gibson, C.B., Dunlop, P.D., & Cordery, J.L. (2019). Managing formalization to increase global team effectiveness and meaningfulness of work in multinational organizations. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 50(6): 1021–52. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-019-00226-8.

4 Gallup. (2013). Remote workers log more hours and are slightly more engaged. Accessed 15 January 2020, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/170669/remote-workers-log-hours-slightly-engaged.aspx.

5 Evans, L. (2014). Why you need to actually talk to your coworkers face to face. *Fast Company*, accessed 16 January 2020, https://www.fastcompany.com/3036935/why-you-need-to-actually-talk-to-your-coworkers-face-to-face.

6 Oxenham, S. (2016). Do you get your best work done in coffee shops? Here's why. New Scientist, accessed 16 January 2020, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2090717-do-you-get-your-best-work-done-in-coffee-shops-heres-why/.