

Coronavirus: How to work remotely the right way

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In response to the uncertainties presented by Covid-19, many companies have been forced to temporarily close and ask their employees to work remotely. Having to work remotely is something very new for most companies and employees. For others, this is the first time and requires a whole change in the work approach whilst for others, it's a practice that has been in existence in their organizations. According to Paul Statham, CEO at Condeco Software, "Coronavirus is accelerating working from home, a trend that was already happening in many businesses and organizations. Although it is always preferable to establish clear remote-work policies and training in advance, in times of crisis or other rapidly changing circumstances, this level of preparation may not be feasible. Fortunately, there are specific, research-based steps that managers can take without great effort to improve the engagement and productivity of remote employees, even when there is little time to prepare.

For many Zimbabwean companies, transitioning to working from home will not be an easy transition. Working remotely can come with its challenges, to start, managers need to understand factors that can make remote work especially demanding. The following challenges were listed in an article by Harvard Business Review:

1. **Lack of face-to-face supervision:** Both managers and their employees often express concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction. Supervisors worry that employees will not work as hard or as efficiently (though research indicates otherwise, at least for some types of jobs). Many employees, on the other hand, struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication. In some cases, employees feel that remote managers are out of touch with their needs, and thereby are neither supportive nor helpful in getting their work done.
1. **Lack of access to information:** Newly remote workers are often surprised by the added time and effort needed to locate information from coworkers. Even getting answers to what seem like simple questions can feel like a large obstacle to a worker based at home. Research has found that a lack of "mutual knowledge" among remote workers translates to a lower willingness to give coworkers the benefit of the doubt in difficult situations. For example, if you know that your officemate is having a rough day, you will view a harsh email from them as a natural product of their stress. However, if you receive this email from a remote coworker, with no understanding of their current circumstances, you are more likely to take offense, or at a minimum to think poorly of your coworker's professionalism.
1. **Social isolation:** Loneliness is one of the most common complaints about remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting. It is thought that extraverts may suffer from isolation more in the short run, particularly if they do not have opportunities to connect with others in their remote-work environment. However, over a longer time, isolation can cause any employee to feel less "belonging" to their organization, and can even result in

increased intention to leave the company.

1. **Distractions at home:** Working from home is not easy especially for employees with children. Home has its distractions which may make getting work done difficult or rather staying productive difficult. Typically, we encourage employers to ensure that their remote workers have both dedicated workspace and adequate childcare before allowing them to work remotely. Yet, in the case of a sudden transition to virtual work, there is a much greater chance that employees will be competing with suboptimal workspaces and (in the case of school and daycare closures) unexpected parenting responsibilities. Managers should expect these distractions to be greater during this unplanned work-from-home transition.

The idea of working remotely comes at a time where most employers and employees were least expecting it. Managers will need to give their employees all the support they need to make the transition easy and also to yield results during this time. The following can be done:

1. **Provide Clear Communication-** Coronavirus or not, the key to working from home is clear communication with your boss – and knowing exactly what’s expected of you. Have clear-set expectations for communications day today,” says Barbara Larson, a professor of management at Northeastern University in Boston who studies remote working. Many successful remote managers establish a daily call with their remote employees. This could take the form of a series of one-on-one calls if your employees work more independently from each other, or a team call, if their work is highly collaborative. The important feature is that the calls are regular and predictable and that they are a forum in which employees know that they can consult with you and that their concerns and questions will be heard. Most people spend their days close to their boss, meaning communication is easy and effortless. But that’s all out the window with remote work, and communication breakdown is even more likely if your workplace is not used to remote working. “Out of sight, out of mind can be a real problem for remote workers,” says Sara Sutton, CEO, and founder of FlexJobs, a remote job listing site. “The very best remote workers will reach out to coworkers and managers regularly” through a variety of tools.
1. **Keep Spirits Up-** Make no mistake, these are stressful times. Negative headlines, worrying about sick or elderly loved ones and fighting the urge to go panic buying for foodstuffs can all put answering work emails on the back burner. But the more effort you put into communicating with colleagues, the better chance you have of avoiding feelings of isolation, which can lead to depression. Include as much face-to-face interaction online as possible through video calls, regular manager check-ins – especially to those employees who live alone and might feel more isolated.
1. **Provide several different communication technology options-** Email alone is insufficient. Remote workers benefit from having a “richer” technology, such as video conferencing, that gives participants many of the visual cues that they would have if they were face-to-face. Video conferencing has many advantages, especially for smaller groups: Visual cues allow for increased “mutual knowledge” about coworkers and also help reduce the sense of isolation among teams. Video is also particularly useful for complex or sensitive conversations, as it feels

more personal than written or audio-only communication. If your company doesn't have technology tools already in place, there are inexpensive ways to obtain simple versions of these tools for your team, as a short-term fix. Consult with your organization's IT department to ensure there is an appropriate level of data security before using any of these tools.

1. **Provide opportunities for remote social interaction-** One of the most essential steps a manager can take is to structure ways for employees to interact socially (that is, have informal conversations about non-work topics) while working remotely. This is true for all remote workers, but particularly so for workers who have been abruptly transitioned out of the office. The easiest way to establish some basic social interaction is to leave some time at the beginning of team calls just for non-work items or basic check-in of how the team is doing (e.g., "We're going to spend the first few minutes just catching up with each other. How was your weekend?").
1. **Offer encouragement and emotional support-** Especially in the context of an abrupt shift to remote work, managers need to acknowledge stress, listen to employees' anxieties and concerns, and empathize with their struggles. If a new remote employee is struggling but not communicating stress or anxiety, ask them how they're doing. Even a general question such as "How is this remote work situation working out for you so far?" can elicit important information that you might not otherwise hear. Research on emotional intelligence and emotional contagion tells us that employees look to their managers for cues about how to react to sudden changes or crises. If a manager communicates stress and helplessness, this will have what Daniel Goleman calls a "trickle-down" effect on employees.

The upsurge of the COVID 19 has brought the need for companies to consider working remotely, with the right support and technology this could see companies being able to remain productive amidst all the chaos. No one knows how long this pandemic will go for but all we can do is consider how companies will remain productive and viable.

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