



## WORKING REMOTELY BRINGS NEW SOCIAL CHALLENGES

BY GRETA DAVIS

Prior to the global pandemic, only about 5 percent of American employees worked from home, and 75 percent of those employed had *never* worked remotely, according to the National Council on Compensation Insurance.

By May 2020, the percentage of remote workers rose to over 60 percent,

and presently, up to 92 percent of employees are working at least one day per week remotely, according to Great Place to Work. We now recognize that hybrid work environments are here to stay, with most workers and employers reporting permanent flexible work opportunities.

Employees report numerous benefits of working remotely. They include flexibility in daily routines (e.g., dropping off/picking up children from school), time and cost savings related to commutes, ease of caring for personal lives, like scheduling doctor's appointments, and more accessibility to family, which is especially important to younger parents.

Employees who want to work at home and are able to work remotely appreciate the benefit, and it can engender a sense of loyalty, commitment, and willingness to do what it takes to get the job completed.

Perhaps this level of engagement contributes to increased productivity for those working at home, as attested by numerous studies over the past two years, including those from Deloitte, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Forbes*.

But there might be potential downsides to permanent hybrid working environments:

**MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMAL AND INCIDENTAL LEARNING.** Younger employees who have historically benefitted from informal learning opportunities are potentially at greater risk for not keeping pace and advancing in their careers. Fewer interactions with more experienced colleagues means less learning is taking place on the job. Incidental learning, which occurs with no intention on the part of the worker, is also reduced. In order to counterbalance potential negative impacts, workers should be more proactive in scheduling informal meetings, coffee chats, or opportunities to connect with colleagues. Learning and development professionals are also rethinking ways to engage employees through eLearning platforms and virtual training events.

**LIMITED VENUES FOR CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION.** Working groups that require collaboration and traditional teamwork can be hampered by remote work, and they face challenges with fewer opportunities to connect in person. Even hybrid work environments can be a challenge if remote days and office days are not properly coordinated. Although productivity and engagement increase when employees get to choose their office days and remote days, employers are recognizing the need to be strategic about scheduling in-person days in relation to business needs and outcomes while trying to maintain flexibilities for workers.

**FEWER AVENUES FOR INFORMAL COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK.** The days of “managing by walking around” and popping into another’s office to check in are fewer and farther between. What’s lost in these informal communications are opportunities to give encouraging feedback – “great job on the presentation today” – or get timely information – “while I have you here, can you take a quick look at these numbers with me?” These types of informal, unplanned interactions contribute to a sense of connection, belonging, and mattering in the workplace. Recent research from the McKinsey consulting firm indicates that people are quitting their jobs when they don’t think their work is valued or when they are not connected to their company. Managers and employees have to work harder at building workplace relationships, expressing appreciation, and giving meaningful feedback in remote and hybrid work environments. As organizations and companies try to find a “new normal,” it will be important to rethink how to help employees connect in meaningful ways.

More than 68 percent of American workers indicate they prefer remote work environments. As technology has kept pace with the demand for remote meetings and digital information sharing, working from home is quite feasible, if not optimal, for many companies and organizations. However, to minimize the potential negative impact on workplace relationships and interactions, companies need to continually evaluate their people strategies by providing opportunities to grow, connect, and learn.



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