

COVID-19: Remote Working Best Practices



Remote Working Best Practices

As the world responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people join the already bustling remote workforce. Companies like Rosetta Stone, Google, Intuit, Amazon, VIPKID, and UnitedHealth Group allow their team members to work remotely even in normal conditions.

If your company had everyone in the office before, but has transitioned to a fully remote team, these best practices can help you address the many challenges associated with it—particularly if you're the team manager and have limited or zero experience handling a fully remote team.

In the traditional work environment, teams and individuals alike have plenty of face-to-face interaction and communication.

Most folks have a clear delineation between working hours and leisure time. They probably have a designated schedule and work area. In the remote world, these things can be harder to achieve.

When it comes to working remotely, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

That's why it's important to involve your team in the process of creating the policies and procedures you want them to follow.

Your Team is Only as Good as Its Communication

Just because you are not in the same room doesn't mean you can't communicate as if you were.

Regardless of how spread out your team is, you can find ways to communicate with one another in real time, even if it means someone is getting up at an odd hour.

And in situations where real-time communication isn't possible, instant messaging platforms such as Skype and Slack make it easy to communicate with others.

When in doubt, ask. It's better to *overcommunicate* than to make assumptions or to avoid communication.

Making accommodations for different schedules and resources—or better still, ensuring everyone on your team has access to the resources required—is particularly important during the COVID-19 crisis.

Some folks may never have worked remotely, and the added stress and labor involved in adapting to “Zoom culture” can take their toll.

In place of an in-office meeting, use Zoom video conferencing to connect with one another as if you were all in the same room. Ahead of the first meeting, send clear instructions so all participants understand how to use it.

This way, you're not wasting valuable time trying to get technical glitches addressed.

Treat video conferencing as you would face-to-face visits. Face-to-face time is important, so there's nothing wrong with behaving as though team members are sitting right next to you.

Experiment with What Works for You

The beauty of telecommuting is that it offers the freedom and flexibility you need to be your most productive. And during a pandemic, it can be a literal life-saver—not just because it limits face-to-face contact, but it allows your team to keep working, and your company to keep operating.

If you have the option, try experimenting with your work hours, so that you're running on the schedule that works best for you. If you find that you're more productive at night, do what you can to get the majority of work done then.

Beyond the time of day, does it make sense to have set work hours, or to break things up? Do you tend to do better with a designated home office, or do you enjoy being a nomad who works from the nearest public Wi-Fi connection?

Would you rather rent a coworking space near your home? Do you enjoy listening to music while you work, or do you require complete silence? Do you thrive in your PJs, or do you have to dress up?

Working at home comes with its own set of distractions, which can be hard to combat. Phone calls, visits from neighbors, children home from school, the chores and other household duties can all entice us away from our desk and derail our day if we let them.

Add in the pressures of a public health crisis, and it makes good sense to dedicate some serious time and contemplation to a work schedule that allows you to get your work done but still accommodates your individual needs for a healthy, safe environment.

Having a plan helps you to stay focused, so you can meet your needs without letting distractions get in your way.

Many people work with their phones on do not disturb, opting not to answer non-work calls during set hours.

They choose not to take care of household tasks because if they were working outside the home, they wouldn't be there to do them anyway.

Try different things until you figure out what works best for you. Everyone works

differently, and with remote work, you have the opportunity to figure out what your “perfect” set up is.

As long as the work gets done and you’re available when others need you to be, that’s all that really matters.

Respect Time Differences

One of the difficult parts of working remotely with a distributed team is the working across different time zones.

Try not to send Slack or Skype messages outside of work hours. Instead, use reminders to send the communication when the team members are in office. At the same time, ensure no one expects a response to messages sent outside working hours – except for during emergencies.

And of course, avoid scheduling meetings during lunch breaks. Collaborate and share calendars so everyone’s always on the same page. Lunchtime for you might be bedtime for a teammate on the other side of the planet.

Use the time when your other remote team members are not online to work on tasks that don’t require their time or input. This way, during the time they are available, you can reach them.

This way, they can give you any necessary feedback as soon as they sign in, and you can move forward with the rest of your day-to-day tasks.

Make Yourself Available

Working across time zones means you won’t always have time to chat with all your team members. You’ll need to set clear boundaries about when you’re available and when you’re not.

Every other remote worker should do the same—and you should make an effort to respect that when and where possible—not just because of time differences, but because of work-life balance, too.

If everyone lets go of those boundaries, they end up working longer hours, which can become a habit.

Too much of that, and you'll have some cases of burnout on your hands. Beyond avoiding burnout, sharply drawn boundaries also help protect your mental health when you're stuck at home during a shelter-in-place scenario.

If you're working mostly at night while everyone else works during the day, be prepared to have at least an hour at the beginning of your shift to catch up with everyone before they are finished for the day.

Set Clear Roles and Responsibilities

To make sure that people aren't wasting time duplicating each other's efforts, it's crucial that everyone knows who is responsible for what and when.

Define the responsibilities, write them down. If there is any confusion as to who is responsible for what, have everyone hop on a call together.

Make sure to give everyone the chance to ask questions and get clarification on what they need.

You can use a free tool like Trello to clearly outline everyone's responsibilities with cards and lists. You can add multiple people to cards, assign due dates, create workflows, etc. as needed based on your company requirements.

Hold Everyone Accountable

If you've ever worked in a traditional office job setting, chances are one of your supervisors would come chat with you, but before announcing his or her presence would see what you were working on -only to catch you scrolling on Facebook, or chatting on Messenger.

The fear of being caught, however, is what keeps you away from it most of the time.

Remote work means that you can chat with whomever you want, whenever you want. Instead of working, you can wash the dishes you should have washed last night, scrub the toilet, do the laundry, or even binge-watch your favorite show.

You can even get away with doing things while you're on a call, so long as you keep your video off.

That's a terrible trap to fall into, and anyone who's worked remotely before has had it happen at least once.

But, there are lots of things you can do to keep your team (and yourself!) accountable.

Timebox all daily tasks. Decide how long something should take and encourage your team to work on it for that length of time.

Select a time management tool like Pomodoro to help everyone block off their time and keep track of time spent on each task.

Use time trackers and alarms to help you stay on track, and consider daily "check-ins" for mission-critical tasks to encourage good time management and accountability.

Block off your calendar off so you know when to focus on and what to focus on, while also preventing people from scheduling meetings at that time. Include breaks in your schedule.

Keep a standard task list, but also make time for socializing with your coworkers so you can foster relationships with them, too.

Work May be at Home, but Work Isn't Home

For people who work outside the home, the time spent commuting is often the time when they wind down and aim to leave all their work issues at work so they don't bring them home to the family.

Trapped at home during a pandemic, where you both live and work, it can be hard to separate the two.

That's why it helps to have an office door you can close for the day and walk away from at a preset hour, so you're not tempted to work your way through dinner or family time. Remember, work is work, and home is home—no matter what happens where.

Figuring out how to successfully work remotely as a team is a learning experience

for both managers and team members.

Remote teams still have a company culture, and it's still a good idea to have a water cooler area where people can chit chat, just like they would if they were grabbing a cup of coffee in the break room.

By focusing on communication, collaboration, and shared standards, tools, and expectations, you can make sure everyone is on the same page, surviving isolation while staying healthy, and getting the job done while still maintaining work-life balance.

With the right policies and tools available to you and your staff, you'll have everything you need to collaborate remotely, keep your business operating during economic downturns and disasters, and ensure everyone's ready to get back to work—remotely or in the office—once the coast is clear.

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